

St Mark: From Mission to Martyrdom

Revd. Canon Mark Oxbrow
Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, UK

Abstract

The Greek term *mártyras* carries the double meaning of witness and martyr. This paper invites an exploration of the relationship between these two in the contexts of first century and contemporary Africa using the life of St. Mark as a historical lens. The paper suggests that many Western authored histories of the Christian movement are distorted by a lack of attention to the Eastern and African expansion of the Church in the early centuries and that contemporary African Christians have erroneously bought into this emaciated history and the theology to which it has given rise. Through an examination of various themes in the life, witness and death of St. Mark, and the relationship between martyrdom and witness in African Christian history, the paper encourages a reappraisal of the African roots of Christianity as a rich source for contemporary discipleship in Africa as well as the Church universal.

Introduction

The theme of our conference this week, witness, in Greek *mártyras* or martyr, derives from the two-fold promise contained in the very last words of the pre-ascendant Lord, "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"¹. The first pneumatological element of this promise is of course a reaffirmation of Jesus' words before and after his death and resurrection (John 14:26; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5), but the second element of the promise is a much clearer statement of what we, through sanctification, or *theosis*, will become. This 'being a witness' is never presented as an option, a choice, a response to a command, but rather the inevitable consequence of the reception, through grace of the Holy Spirit. In this paper we will explore what it meant for a young African migrant of the first century CE to find himself living the life of a witness, a martyr, as he is drawn ever deeper into the life of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We may never know but it is logistically and socially possible that as an inquisitive teenager Mark was actually present when the resurrected Christ promised him, "*you [Mark] will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witness[es] in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" The story we are about to explore is not just an interesting historical investigation it is a missional challenge for every young African today.

A young man in a linen garment

I want to begin our recollection of Mark with one of the most intriguing vignettes in his gospel. I refer to Mark 14:51-52 which reports that as Jesus was arrested "*A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.*" Why is this small, seemingly inconsequential, story included here when it appears to have

¹ Acts 1:8

so little impact on the world transforming events that are unfolding through the arrest, death and resurrection of the Son of God. Many scholars have concluded that this can only have been included because the young man in question was in fact the young Mark. If so then this passage is not only an interesting side story but it represents, at least in the story of Mark that we are following in this paper, highly important theological perspectives. I will name just three.

Firstly, the young man is described as “following Jesus”. Mark, assuming it is him, self-identifies as a follower of Jesus. His motives for following are not revealed. Perhaps he was just an inquisitive teenager, or he sniffed a night-time adventure, or perhaps he was deeply interested in this man whom he was to later boldly describe as, “*Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.*”² Nineteen times in his gospel Mark speaks of those who follow Jesus but their motives are all different. Some followed out of total commitment having given up everything to be with Jesus, others followed because they were hungry and a number of women, we are told, followed so that they could care for Jesus. As a young man, a teenager, Mark is here, in the garden of arrest, learning to follow, to be a disciple. Secondly, by implication, we learn that Mark was a witness, a *mártyras*. He was an eye witness to the arrest of Jesus and spoke of what he saw and knew. At that young age Mark knew nothing of the witness he was to bear across the known world in later years nor of the martyrdom which would fulfil and complete this witness – but he knew what he had seen, he knew he had witnessed something very important that would later shape his life. Finally, in the darkness of that garden, surrounded by sword wielding soldiers, the young Mark experienced vulnerability. He was young, unarmed, dressed only in a linen cloth (probably his sleeping garment) and even that was stripped from him so he had to run home naked. This vulnerability was important, it was to shape his understanding of discipleship and it would later help him as he ministered to a community which knew, and knows even today, extreme vulnerability as people of a minority faith in a hostile world. This strange vignette hidden in the final chapters of his gospel introduces us to the saint who was a follower, a witness and a martyr living in vulnerability for the sake of the uniquely vulnerable Son of God.

The African roots of Orthodox faith and the orthodox roots of African faith

This paper has a strong African flavour for four reasons. Firstly, we are met in Africa. Secondly the historical evidence gives St. Mark a strong African identity. Thirdly there is a contemporary desire to recover the African roots and identify of Christian faith. And fourthly because this Mark, your presenter, wishes to honour the African roots of his own faith. Let me first address the third of these points.

The unfortunate combined hegemony of the English language, Western theological writing, and Global North leadership within the global Christian and missionary movements over several centuries has blinded many of us to the highly significant African influence on the shaping of Christian theology, witness and service. With the contemporary growth of the African Church (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal) we see an increasing desire to recover African roots. Thomas Oden opens his recent book on Orthodoxy and Africa with the words, “*Classic African Christian teaching in the patristic period (100-750 AD) preceded modern colonialism by over a thousand years. Many young African women and men are now re-examining these lost roots. They are hungry for accurate information on their brilliant Christian ancestors.*”³ During the thirty years that I served as a Director of mission agencies I have often despaired at the theological library shelves in Nairobi, Lusaka and Addis Ababa that groan under the weight of Luther, Bultmann and Rick Warren but with no trace to be found of Tertullian, Augustine of Hippo, Frumentius of Ethiopia, John Mbiti of Kenya, Kwame Bediako of Ghana or any of the other highly significant African

² Mark 1:1

³ Oden, Thomas *The Rebirth of African Orthodoxy – Return to Foundations* Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2016 p.3

theologians. A deliberate programme of recovering our African roots (and I say 'our' because these roots are just as important to Europeans and Asians as to African) is long overdue.

One of the challenges we face is that the New Testament canon focuses almost entirely on one stand of the expansion of the early Church and this bias has been reinforced by English speaking church historians who focus has almost always been on Rome, Mount Athos, Geneva and Azuza Street rather than Edessa, the great theological melting pot of the Eastern Churches; Baghdad, the seat of Patriarch Timothy I the premier theologian of the Church of the East and after him many Oriental Orthodox Church leaders; Alexandria, the home of some of the greatest early Biblical scholars; and Carthage, the home of Tertullian our earliest major Christian apologist. Amongst Orthodox historians there has at least been a little more acknowledgement of the significance of the Syrian and other Oriental Church traditions of the East but still far too little honouring of the African heritage of the Undivided Church, a heritage I intend to honour in this paper.

This would be a different paper if we were to explore to the full the African heritage we have ignored for so many centuries but we need at least to put Mark, the first Bishop of Alexandria, into context by naming some of the best known African Fathers of the faith, many of whom are often treated in the literature as if they were Greeks or Romans! We must begin with one of Mark's successors, **Clement of Alexandria** (c.150-c.215) the catechist and tutor of Origen, closely followed by **Tertullian** of Carthage (c.160-c.225) one of the first great apologists. Also from Carthage we must honour one of the martyrs of the Church, **Cyprian** (c.200-c.250) who gave us such a good example of pastoral ministry and the witness of a sacrificial life. Further east we find **Marcus Minucius Felix** (d.250) of Berber extraction another great apologist of the early church. Then comes **Origen** himself (c.185-c.254) born in Alexandria here in Egypt and the first theologian to expound Christian doctrine in a systematic way. Another significant Berber from North Africa was **Lucius Lactantius** (c.250-c.325) who became an advisor to the first Christian emperor, Constantine, guiding his religious policy as it developed. The giant amongst North African Christians is probably **Augustine of Hippo** (c.354-c430) born in contemporary Algeria. His work of catechesis remains a bench mark for anyone working on Christian formation even today. One of his pupils, **Optatus of Milevi**, also a Berber, was also a key apologist for orthodoxy against the Donatists. Having started with Clement of Alexandria I cannot end this list without mentioning **Cyril** also of Alexandria (c.376-444) who was a central figure in the Council of Ephesus in 431CE and the surrounding Christological disputes. These are but a small sample of the African Fathers of the Church. The undivided Church, Orthodoxy and evangelicalism alike, have firm roots in the soil of Africa. But what about St. Mark?

Mark the African

Mark certainly ended his life here in Egypt but where was it begun? In his interesting, if somewhat speculative, book *The African Memory of Mark – Reassessing early Church tradition*,⁴ Thomas Oden advances the theory that Mark always had a heart for Africa because he was in fact born in Africa, in Cyrene (in contemporary Libya) to be precise. How did this come about?

We begin with the pre-Nicene document *Martyrium Marci* which records the ancient tradition, maintained to this day within the Coptic and other Orthodox communities, that "This Saint [Mark] was born in Cyrene (one of the five Western cities, Pentapolis – in North Africa)." To find a native of Cyrene in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus is in no way unexpected,

⁴ Oden, T.C. *The African Memory of Mark – Reassessing early Church Tradition* Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2011

partly because of the Biblical references to Simon of Cyrene⁵, the man whom the Roman soldiers forced to carry Christ's cross and the presence of residents from "*the parts of Libya near Cyrene*"⁶ on the day of Pentecost, but also because of what we know about the social and political upheavals in Cyrene at this time. It is also worth noting that although Matthew and Luke repeat the tradition, probably drawing on Mark, that Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Christ only Mark speaks of him as, "*the father of Alexander and Rufus*"⁷, implying that the Cyrenian community was one with which Mark was familiar and with which he felt a personal connection. Turning to the situation in the *Pentapolis* itself we find here a region of North Africa which had known considerable prosperity and had attracted a significant Jewish diaspora, some of whom had accumulated personal wealth through trading and other business enterprises. Both Suetonius and Josephus report tribal conflicts and rising civil unrest in the Pentapolis between 5-15 CE and the migration of more wealthy Jewish families to the safer context of Israel. The suggestion of Oden and others is that the young Mark⁸, with his mother Mary, was a part of this migration to Jerusalem where the family, using the wealth gained in the diaspora, established a substantial house and exhibited the capacity to act as 'patron' to a new Jewish prophet and his associates.

So far we are on fairly solid ground in connecting the John Mark of Acts, the valued companion of Peter, Paul and Barnabus, with the migrant Jewish community from North Africa who found themselves in Jerusalem about the time of the public ministry of Jesus. Where the argument, advanced by Oden, becomes a little more speculative is when we link this early evangelist, and author of the second canonical gospel with the events of the last week of Jesus' life in Jerusalem. Much depends of the story with which I began this paper, the assumption that the houses mentioned in Mark 14:14 and Acts 12:12 are identical, and a number of later Church traditions. If Mark was the young boy who followed Jesus and his disciples into the garden and witnessed his arrest, then he almost certainly belonged to the household where the Last Supper was held. How would any other teenager have known what was going on that night as the meal had been arranged so secretly. It also makes sense that Jesus would arrange that meal in the home of one of his more wealthy patrons, Mary the mother of John Mark, and that later that when Peter is released by an angel from prison⁹ he should flee to the house he knows best as the Jerusalem 'sanctuary' of his new community, the house of the Last Supper, the home clearly identified by Luke in Acts 12 as that of John Mark and his mother.¹⁰ The fact that Mary hosted the Passover meal and provided sanctuary for Peter implies further that she was one of the close followers of Jesus and part of the earliest Christian community, or church, in Jerusalem. Mark's father is never

⁵ Mark 15:21

⁶ Acts 2:10

⁷ Mark 15:21

⁸ It is also worth noting that Luke, in Acts, tells us that Mark's full name was "John Mark", an interesting name which brings together both Hebrew (John) and Latin (Mark) cultural roots, again indicative of the multi-cultural experience of diaspora communities. A young boy born in the Jerusalem of the early first century, under despised Roman occupation, would be unlikely to have been given a Roman, Latin, name.

⁹ Acts 12:7-12

¹⁰ Oden goes further to suggest that the home of John Mark and his mother was also the home where the disciples gathered after the crucifixion and where resurrection appearances took place and eventually the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples empowering them for mission (see chapter 6 in Oden, T.C. *The African Memory of Mark*). If we accept this hypothesis, and the evidence that Oden advances is substantial, then this also places the young Mark in very close proximity to the resurrected Christ and the outpouring of God's Spirit, experiences which may well have empowered him for the amazing ministry of the rest of his life.

mentioned¹¹ which might imply that Mary was a single mother (possibly as a result of some tragedy in Cyrene) which would have placed Mark, as a son over the age of twelve, in a position of responsibility within the home and quite likely also a follower, or believer, of the new prophet, Jesus, from his early teens onwards. Most of this cannot be substantiated from scripture but is authenticated by church tradition some of which is very ancient.

For me the strongest indication of the African roots of Mark is the way in which, during his extensive missionary journeys over several decades he seems to be constantly drawn back to Africa where he was eventually to lead the church of Alexandria and die as a martyr, giving his blood to the soil of this great continent.

Mark the migrant

We find ourselves on much firmer ground when we move into the record of Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. Mark's first appearance in this story is a little puzzling but supports a strong tradition. After being released from prison and fleeing to the home of Mary and John Mark, Peter departs (it seems very rapidly and probably for his own safety) to "*another place*"¹², which tradition suggests was Egypt, mirroring the earlier flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, but then in Acts 12:25 we are told that, following the death of Herod, "*when Barnabas and Saul (Paul) had finished their mission, they returned to Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.*" This implies two important things. Firstly, Paul did not waste his time in his place of sanctuary but was in mission there, and secondly that he had not gone there alone but with Barnabas and Mark. We can understand why he might have chosen Barnabas as a travelling companion when he had to flee Jerusalem but why had Mark also gone with him. I think there are three reasons why this young man was chosen by Peter, or perhaps nominated by his mother, to join the two older men of this dangerous journey. If our suppositions about Mark so far are correct, then Mark was an experienced migrant. He knew how to survive on the road, how to navigate his way through aggressive officialdom, how to settle in a new culture and learn a new language. If Egypt was Peter's place of refuge then Mark had already travelled through that country on his way from Cyrene to Jerusalem some years before. Secondly, I believe Mark was chosen because of his status within a wealthy family. Peter was a fisherman, no doubt of limited means, but Mark could command the resources needed for a successful migration and would know how to deal with many of the practicalities of life. Finally, we have already seen that Mark was likely one of the inner circle of early disciples of Jesus, present (but probably behind a curtain!) at the Last Supper, the arrest, and may be the resurrection appearances and Pentecost itself – he was the ideal spiritual companion for an older believer prone to doubts.

In Acts 13:5 we hear of John (Mark) accompanying Barnabas and Paul on their mission trip to Cyprus and Perga as their "helper" and so begin, for Mark, many years of travel and mission. Paul seems to have been upset when Mark leaves Perga to return to Jerusalem¹³, and consequentially refused to take him on a later journey whilst Barnabas (described by

¹¹ There is however an ancient tradition that Aristopolis, whose 'household' Paul greets in his epistle from Rome (Romans 16:10) was from Cyrene and was the father of Mark. The greeting of Aristopolis' household but not him personally may well imply that Aristopolis has died, perhaps even in Cyrene before John Mark and his mother migrated to Jerusalem.

¹² Acts 12:17

¹³ Acts 13:13

Paul as the cousin of Mark¹⁴) took the young man with him to Cyprus.¹⁵ That rift with Paul was obviously healed at a later date because Paul writes to Timothy from Rome, “Only Luke is with me, Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.”¹⁶

There is no space in this short paper to map out all of Mark’s likely criss-crossing of the Mediterranean Sea in support of the mission work of Peter, Paul and Barnabas but we do know that he later found himself back in Egypt, a migrant returning to his roots on African soil.

My purpose in this brief section has been to highlight the strength and insights that Mark brought to mission and ministry from his identity as a migrant and in so doing to alert us to the gift that contemporary African migrants are to the universal Church. Migrants, whether forced into migration or moving out of choice, are resilient, they know how to survive and to rely on divine providence. They have many cross-cultural skills that the rest of us lack and they know how to deal with the authorities, to find shelter, to build community, to preserve a faith tradition, and so much more. Today African migrants drown in the Mediterranean but many others cross successfully to bring the gospel of God’s love and reviving Spirit to Europe and beyond.

Mark the youth

I want to turn now to Mark as the young man. We do not know exactly how old Mark was when he first met Jesus, or when he set out with Peter and Barnabas to find a place of refuge but we can be almost certain that he was the youngest of those early disciples to respond to the call to cross-cultural mission. We do know¹⁷ that he died on 26 April 68 CE as a bishop and martyr probably still in his early-50s or younger. The fact that such a young man should have such an important role in the establishment of the Church, not only in Africa but also in southern Europe and at the gateway (in Antioch) to Asia is both counter-cultural for first century Middle Eastern society but also highly symbolic of the call that Jesus gave to place the child in the midst¹⁸ of our consideration of eternal matters.

Africa is a young continent and here in Egypt 53.2% of the population are under 25 years of age¹⁹. Despite a one-day consultation which we sponsored with young Christians in Albania in 2014 and a mission venture with children here in Egypt, the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative have not done well in relating to those under 25. We are not alone in this. Most Churches, whether Orthodox or evangelical struggle to bring children and youth into the local and global mission of the Church. In recent years the Child Theology Movement has focused on:

“Doing theology with a child in the midst”. One of the founders of the movement, Keith White, writes, “Our contention is that the little child [of Matthew 18:2] (about whom we know nothing) was called and placed by Jesus into the midst of an existing form of

¹⁴ Colossians 4:10

¹⁵ Acts 15:37-40

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 4:11

¹⁷ The date of 26 April 68 CE is given by the *Coptic Synaxarion (Baramouda [Ethiopic-Amharic Miyazia] 30)* but other sources such as Jerome (*Lives of Illustrious Men*), the Coptic-Arabic history of Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa and Eutychius of Alexandria all offer or imply earlier dates.

¹⁸ Matthew 18:2

¹⁹ https://www.indexmundi.com/egypt/age_structure.html accessed 12.08.19

*theology in order to challenge and change it. Jesus interrupted and challenged the beliefs and lives of any who sought to follow him. The call is not to change the disciples' attitudes to the child (although such attitudes most certainly will change if they get the point). Rather the child is invited into the unfolding story of Jesus as he proclaims, signs and seeks the Kingdom of God. In our view, there is no way the child can be abstracted (decontextualised) from the narrative of Matthew, the person of Jesus, the theological arguing of the disciples, the culture of the time or the nature of the Kingdom of God. The sign of the child in the midst is not self-evident in any time or culture, but rather chosen by God in Christ to challenge our theology and lives."*²⁰

Perhaps the young Mark is the 'child' who is being placed in our midst this week to challenge our theology and our lives, but even more importantly he may be challenging us to open up our theological discourse to the children and youth of Egypt, of Africa and of each of our communities today.

Mark the witness

We have already noted that Mark was, in all probability, amongst those who followed Jesus during his ministry, and, in his gospel writing, gives prominence to those who for different reasons chose to become followers of Jesus. Discipleship is at the heart of his witness. The important question before us now, however, is what was the character of that discipleship, what did following Jesus look like for Mark?

If we take the oldest Greek manuscripts of Mark's gospel as authoritative and his ending to be 16:8²¹, then Mark's final words are:

*"[The angel] said to [the women], 'Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they said him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him as he told you.' And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."*²²

The words here, "they said nothing to anyone" and their motive, "for they were afraid", as we will see, stand as a powerful motif for the character of African discipleship in the first three centuries. In fact, it seems that this ending was so shocking to later custodians of the text that their additions (both the longer and shorter versions) set out to correct this denial of verbal witness. The longer version adds "they went forth and preached everywhere"²³ and the shorter version adds, "Jesus himself sent out, by means of them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation."

²⁰ Keith Ward in the forward to *Anvil* Vol 35 Issue 1 March 2019 p.14 pub. Church Mission Society. This edition of *Anvil* is themed around Child Theology and also includes a useful article by Frances Young *Child Theology: A theological response*. This topic was also the subject of a theological consultation sponsored by the 4/14 Movement in Seoul, Korea, in 2013 the papers from which have been published as, Dan Brewer and John Baxter-Brown (eds.) *Children & Youth as Partners in Mission*, Penang, Compassion International, 2013

²¹ Other manuscripts add a further twelve verses (Mark 16:9-20), whilst others add just a lengthened version of verse 8. These longer versions of the ending of Mark's gospel are also missing from the oldest form of the Syriac and three of the oldest Armenian manuscripts of the gospel. Eusebius and Jerome both note that this ending is missing from the best Greek manuscripts available to them. Rawlinson asserts that the evidence points to the longer endings "having formed no part of the oldest texts current in Africa, Alexandria, Caesarea, Antioch." (A.E.J. Rawlinson *St. Mark*, London, Methuen & Co. 1925)

²² Mark 16:6-8.

²³ Mark 16:20

As Alan Kreider has recently pointed out²⁴, the witness of the early Fathers of the African Church, the successors to Mark, the first bishop of Alexandria, is that proclamation, evangelism, verbal witness, was hardly on their agenda. For at least three centuries the Church of Africa grew through the witness of holy lives. Clement of Alexandria uses the models of Daniel and Jonah to suggest that in a hostile environment the Christian's witness should be one of "language, life and behaviour"²⁵ and in his catechesis focuses on the training of new believers in distinctive Christian values and the adoption of a new life-style. Also in the second century, but in the Middle East, Justin Martyr in a similar matter points to the witness of life. As Kreider records, "Justin contended that chistocentric patience was potent. It didn't merely change people's attitudes, and it didn't take people out of the world. It formed people who made a difference in the world, including the business world, and they attracted people to the faith because their patience made them different enough to be intriguing and because they held out hope."²⁶ Origen, the great theologian, in his catechetical homilies, focuses not so much on theology as on behaviour, reminding his readers that their behaviour was the basis on which outsiders – Greeks, philosophers and 'common folk' – would make decisions for or against Jesus.²⁷ For a more theologically nuanced rationale of this focus on the witness of Christian living we turn to Tertullian who links Christian living in an unbelieving world with the incarnation. He asserts that the Christians' patient approach to life, accepting suffering and even martyrdom, and looking always to the needs of others, "attracts the heathen"²⁸, in the same way that the life of God incarnate in Jesus attracted the first disciples. Finally, this theme is taken even further by Cyprian who, commenting on Matt. 5:43-48, suggests that through baptism and a heavenly birth, his readers can "become like God" (*simile Deo*). As God perfects them, "the patience of God the Father" abides in them and enables them "to possess among our virtues what can be put on a par with the divine merits!"²⁹ It is this sanctification, deification or *theosis*, which, Cyprian suggests, creates lives that witness to the power of salvation to be found in the gospel of Christ.

The thesis of Kreider's work is that the African church of the first three centuries grew because of the 'habitus', the 'Christ-like' behaviour and life-style of the Christian community which was both intriguing and attractive to those outside the faith. He maintains that the African church of those early years had no strategy for evangelism and little verbal proclamation of the gospel and yet it grew at a rate rarely seen in subsequent centuries. To what degree Mark was instrumental in setting this tone in first century Alexandria we shall never know but this African approach does pose an important question for contemporary mission. In his concluding chapter Kreider argues that Constantine and Augustine of Hippo (Roman emperor and African bishop) and the Council of Nicea set in motion the demise of church growth through the African witness of Christ-like lives and replaced it with the coercive, violent growth of powerful Church, the Christendom project. The question for us, in a post Christendom era, is whether our witness, and the church growth which it can engender, might be better shaped by the early African model than by a desire to recover the powers of Christendom.

²⁴ Alan Kreider *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic 2016

²⁵ Clement, *Strom.* 2.104.1 (Ferguson, 226)

²⁶ Alan Kreider *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic 2016 p.293

²⁷ Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 14.8, trans. J.C. Smith, FC 97 (1998), 143

²⁸ Tertullian, *Patience* 15.3 (Daly, 220)

²⁹ Cyprian *Patience* 5 (Conway, 267)

In work that I am currently engaged in within the Anglican Communion, we are discovering that discipleship that focuses on character formation and living 'lives worthy of the Gospel of Christ', to quote our conference sub-title, in every sector of contemporary society may well be the way forward in Christian witness and the growth of the Church. In this evangelicals have a lot to learn from the Orthodox theology of *theosis* and from our African Church Fathers.

Mark the mission companion and ambassador

If the tradition is accurate then Mark was the son of a relatively wealthy family, an eye witness of the life and ministry of Jesus, a man of some education and a powerful communicator – all qualities that would have qualified him as an independent witness and church planter, and yet we know that he spent many years accompanying and supporting Peter, Paul and Barnabas. It was only much later that he seems to have been encouraged by Paul to return to his native North Africa and establish churches there. In this Mark gives us a pattern of servanthood in mission, indeed of *kenosis*, self-emptying so that he does not get in the way of the message of salvation. It is only in recent years that many Churches have taken seriously the *Missio Dei* theology which understands mission as the eternal activity and prerogative of God, and ourselves, by grace, participants in this divine action. Sadly there are still those in evangelical, as well as other traditions, who seek to own the mission as if they are doing God a favour by their sacrificial activity. Mark clearly sees himself not as the owner of a mission to Asia Minor and later North Africa, but rather a partner, a participant, an ambassador, to use Paul's term, of the God who is both sender and sent. John Chrysostom reminds us,

*The Father sent the Son to beseech, and to be his Ambassador unto mankind. When then He was slain and gone, we succeeded to the embassy; and in his stead and the Father's we beseech you. So greatly doth He prize mankind that He gave up even the Son, and that knowing He would be slain, and made us Apostles for your sakes; so that he said with reason, "All things are for your sakes" (2 Cor. 4:15). "We are therefore ambassadors on behalf of Christ," that is, instead of Christ; for we have succeeded to his functions."*³⁰

Mark foreshadows this teaching of John Chrysostom by living the life of an ambassador, knowing full well that just as Christ was slain so too might Christ's ambassador be expected to meet the same end, as he did here in Egypt.

This short paper does not allow opportunity to explore more fully the themes of partnership and embassy in mission but the life of Mark and the theology of John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church do challenge many patterns of mission which we see in our churches today. They encourage us to explore more deeply the implications of divine partnership and to prepare ourselves for the cost of true ambassadorial service. They challenge any sense of human ownership of mission and call for a deep discerning of the Spirit in all missional activity.

³⁰ John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians Homily X1 v.20* (trans. Philip Schaff) Kindle version

Mark the evangelist of the Spirit

The first bishop of Alexandria, John Mark, companion of Peter, Paul and Barnabas, is of course best known to us through his gospel – as one of the four evangelists. There is a strong tradition that the gospel was written in Rome and relies heavily on the testimony of Peter at the end of his ministry. The gospel is, however, I believe, much more than simply the dictated work of Peter with Mark acting as scribe. As I read the gospel again and again I see in it the hand of an African leader, a man who already has experience of, and is looking forward to, planting more churches on African soil. Let me explain.

Firstly, there is an earthiness to the gospel of Mark, a connection to the blood, sweat, tears and laughter of ordinary human lives. We see here none of the high philosophy of John, the refined language of the educated doctor Luke, or the deeply Jewish traditions of the stable faith community into which Matthew speaks, but rather the practical application of a costly discipleship. Secondly, what we certainly do see here in Mark is an aliveness to the spirit world. If we allow ourselves to be immersed in the ether of Mark's gospel we find ourselves in a liminal place between the world of the supernatural powers – God, Satan and the spirits – and the human world of injustice, brutality and compassion, the two worlds inexorably entwined. Mark opens his gospel with Isaiah's great cry of hope – into the wilderness of our daily experience enters the voice, the Word of God, demanding the straightening of our ways, a highway in this world for the divine.³¹ Then the prophet John announces the arrival not of a political leader, a messianic king or a social reformer but the divine Spirit of God.³² The liminality of our experience allows for the arrival of Godself in the wilderness of our lives. No sooner has the arrival of the Spirit been announced than she descends in the form of a dove upon a man who is declared to be the beloved divine Son of God.³³ For a few verses the divine Spirit of God seems to be running the show but we get no further than verse 23 before the "unclean spirit"³⁴ rises to contest the intrusion of the Spirit, "the Holy One of God"³⁵ into the traditionally acknowledged territory of the spirits of this world. Let battle commence! As we read on we are immediately transported into the spirit-enlivened world of the African village.

Mark's gospel stands as a challenge to the duality of much of contemporary Western theology which does not take seriously the 'super-reality' of the spiritual realm. As Orthodox theologians often remind us it is the physical realm that is temporal, temporary and passing and the spiritual realm which is eternally sustained in the life of the Trinity, but in the incarnate Lord the two cannot be wrenched apart.

Before leaving this reflection on Mark as the evangelist of the Spirit it is helpful to note two further points. Firstly, although it is highly likely that Mark was a witness to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost³⁶ and his mentor, Peter, was a key participant on that life-changing

³¹ Mark 1:2-3

³² Mark 1:8

³³ Mark 1:11

³⁴ Mark 1:23

³⁵ Mark 1:24

³⁶ Thomas Oden has argued quite convincingly that the upper room where the disciples received the Holy Spirit was very likely the same room as that used for the Last Supper in the home of John Mark and his mother. See

day³⁷, his gospel makes no mention of this event nor the earlier promise of Jesus to send the Spirit³⁸. This is surprising. Might the reason for this be that for Mark, following the resurrection and the testimony of the centurion, “Truly this man was the Son of God”³⁹, the Spirit of God is no longer distinguishable from the Son. Not only has the divine invaded the material world but the way has been opened up for the material to find its true being in divinity? Secondly we should note that Mark’s acute awareness of the world of the spirits does not lead to a ‘spiritualisation’ of the gospel but rather to a very earthy political agenda for justice, peace and human dignity in the here and now⁴⁰, to living a life worthy of the gospel of Christ in this complex ‘wilderness’ of a world in which we find ourselves today.

Mark the church planter

The record of Mark’s ministry which Luke records for us in his Acts of the Apostles suggests that he travelled widely in Asia Minor, Greece and on to Rome as a mentee, or apprentice of Peter, Paul and Barnabas, learning from his elders and so being prepared as the ‘apostle to Africa’, his native land. According to Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa⁴¹, Bishop of al-Ašmūnīn in the tenth century, on leaving Rome Mark first travelled to Alexandria and then on to his home region of Cyrene in Upper Libya to plant churches amongst the Jewish community there.⁴² It is clear from the tradition that Mark’s ministry spread far beyond the Jewish diaspora community as he spent some years in an area of Libya known as the Pentapolis (five towns) planting churches and training church leaders amongst the native populations. The exact details of his ministry in north Africa are not clear but Thomas Oden quotes one standard Coptic chronology which suggests that in Alexandria Mark “ordained a bishop (Anianos), three priests and several deacons to look after the congregation if anything befell him. He left Alexandria to Berce [in the Pentapolis], then to Rome, where he met St. Peter and St. Paul and remained there until their martyrdom in 64AD. Upon returning to Alexandria in 65AD, St. Mark found his people firm in faith and thus decided to visit the Pentapolis. There he spent two years preaching and performing miracles, ordaining bishops and priests and winning more converts. Finally he returned to Alexandria and was overjoyed to find that Christians had multiplied so much that they were able to build a considerable church in the suburban district of Baucalis”.⁴³

This traditional record of Mark’s ministry paints the picture of someone who was an evangelist and church planter at heart. Having witnessed the martyrdom of his mentors and

Thomas Oden *The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition*, Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2011, p.94-98

³⁷ Acts 2:14f

³⁸ John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7

³⁹ Mark 15:39

⁴⁰ See for a much fuller treatment of this aspect of Mark’s gospel Ched Myers *Binding the Strong Man: A political reading of Mark’s story of Jesus*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books 1988

⁴¹ Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa. *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, ed. Yasa ‘Abad al-Masih, O.H.E. Burmester, A.S. Atiya and Antoine Khater, Vol 1, Le Caire, 1943 p.141-2

⁴² Sawirus is here recording earlier traditions, particularly those from the *Martyrium Marci* and early Egyptian document which has not been accurately dated but which comes from sometime between the second and fourth centuries. An English translation of *Martyrium Marci* can be found in E.A. Wallis Budge, ed., “The Martyrdom of St Mark the Evangelist” in *The Contendings of the Apostles*, vol. 1 *The English Translation* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1901 pp. 309-18

⁴³ Oden, T.C. *The African Memory of Mark – Reassessing early Church Tradition* Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2011, 139. quoting <http://www.suscopts.org/coptic-orthodox/church/saint-mark/> visited 18.10.19

elders in Rome he returns to Alexandria which is rapidly becoming the centre of church life in first century Africa but is restless there and immediately moves out to the Pentapolis to continue his mission work there. The fact that we are told that in those two years he ordained several bishops as well as priests suggests that the church was growing and new congregations were being established right across the region. Sawirus talks of Mark's church planting work in "the province of Egypt, of Africa and Pentapolis, and *all those regions*" (emphasis added)⁴⁴ and the earlier *Martyrium Marci* speaks of his ordaining "church leaders for the whole Pentapolis region"⁴⁵ Finally, according to the tradition, it took not one but two angelic visions to persuade Mark to leave his church planting work in Libya and return to the leadership of the church in Alexandria.⁴⁶ Planting ecclesial communities of witnessing Christians was the core of Mark's discipleship and ministry and in a sense a precursor of, if not a contributing factor to, his eventual martyrdom.

Mark the witness and martyr

I began this paper by emphasising the etymological connection between the English words 'witness' and 'martyr' but so far have focused primarily of the witness rather than the martyrdom of Mark. This has been quite deliberate because I want to argue not just a continuity between the two but rather a deep dependence of the one on the other. I believe that martyrdom was no surprise for Mark and may even have been received as the most appropriate summation of his life of witness.

Recent research by the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity indicates that during my lifetime there have been at least 11 million Christian martyrs⁴⁷. During the 1970s and 80s these martyrs were predominantly eastern Europeans and those from the former Soviet Union but today they are more likely to be Africans, citizens of South Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt, Nigeria, Cameroon or the Central African Republic. But even though the last 35 years of my life have been spent travelling in these regions I am only conscious of ever meeting two people who were to become part of this glorious cloud of martyrs. It was not the same for Mark. His teenage discipleship began with the crucifixion, the martyrdom, of Jesus, he would have almost certainly known Stephen, the first Christian martyr, he witnessed the martyrdom of his mentors Peter and Paul in Rome, and it is likely that he saw opposition to the gospel and death as the church grew in north Africa and challenged many vested cultic interests.

Stronger evidence of Mark's expectation of a violent response to the witness of Christians comes from his gospel itself. In recording Jesus' words about the 'end times' Mark's text runs parallel with that of Matthew and Luke⁴⁸ (who many scholars believe are using Mark's text as their source at this point) but has his own distinct emphasis. Whilst Matthew, with his Jewish hearers in mind, emphasises Jesus' call to careful reading of the signs of the times and faithful patience as they wait for the Lord's return, and Luke has a similar emphasis on resolute forbearance in the face of suffering, Mark has a much clearer focus on witness. He

⁴⁴ Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa. *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, 141

⁴⁵ *Martyrium Marci* 6-10

⁴⁶ Oden, T.C. *The African Memory of Mark*, 140

⁴⁷ Johnson T.M. et al *Christianity 2018: More African Christians and Counting Martyrs* IBMR January 2018 Vol 42 No.1

⁴⁸ Matthew 24:1-44, Mark 13:1-37 and Luke 21:5-24

is more specific about the opportunities for witness that will be provided in the hostile councils and synagogues. Jesus is recorded as saying, "They will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings *for my sake*, to bear testimony before them"⁴⁹ and in Mark this is immediately followed by, "And the gospel must first be preached to all nations"⁵⁰ (which is there in Matthew 24:14 but separated from the "tribulation" and "put you to death" of Matthew 24:9). There is no doubt here in Mark that the suffering and death which will ultimately come is an integral part of the witness to all nations.

In the following verses of Mark's gospel we see not only an underlining of this link between martyrdom and witness but also an earlier theme which we addressed in this paper, the role of the Spirit in Christian discipleship. Jesus says, "when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say [your witness]; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit".⁵¹ Again Spirit-inspired witness is central to occasions of suffering and martyrdom. On this passage Martin Hengel writes⁵²,

"I do not believe that we can understand Mark 13:10, bracketed as it is by Mark 13:9 and Mark 13:11-12, which are texts about persecution, without looking at the effect of the Gospel. Mark 13:9-11 cannot be understood without reference to the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus (Mark 15:39). Like the suffering of Jesus, so too that of his community has the character of witness. Campenhausen⁵³ therefore rightly cites Mark 15:39 in connection with the missionary effect of martyrdom, which is expressed most clearly in Tertullian, Apologeticum 50:21f.: semen est sanguis Christianorum."

Here and elsewhere Hengel holds up the confession of the Roman centurion on the death of Jesus, "Truly this man was the Son of God"⁵⁴ as the "climax of the whole Gospel"⁵⁵, effectively completing what Mark has begun with the first words of his book, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Here, as Hengel says, "the commander of the execution squad becomes the first 'confessor'⁵⁶ – death, martyrdom, witness and confession are held together as one.

The centrality of witness to the gospel in Mark's thinking and its connection with martyrdom draws us to one final verse which stands not at the beginning or end of his book but rather at the very heart of it, when Jesus first begins to speak about his own death. This passage, "Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it"⁵⁷ has parallels in Matthew and Luke⁵⁸ but it is only Mark who includes "the gospel". Again we see Mark's overriding concern for mission, for the preaching of the gospel, for witness. One can almost image that

⁴⁹ Mark 13:9 Note almost exact parallel in Luke 21:12-13 but not in Matthew 24:9

⁵⁰ Mark 13:10

⁵¹ Mark 13: 11-12 Matthew does not record this saying but Luke has it at an earlier point in his gospel at Luke 12:11-12

⁵² Hengel, M. *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* London, SCM Press, 1985 p.134 n.143

⁵³ Campenhausen, H. von *Die Idee des Martyriums in der alten Kirche*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1936

⁵⁴ Mark 15:39

⁵⁵ Hengel, M. *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* p.24

⁵⁶ *Ibid* p.24

⁵⁷ Mark 8:35

⁵⁸ Matthew 16:25 and Luke 9:24

while Mark was being dragged by the throat around the street of Alexandria, as his life-blood drained out into the dust, he may have played those words over and over in his mind, “Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”

The actual facts of Mark’s martyrdom are wrapped in tradition and somewhat confused, with at least three sites claimed for his death and more for his burial, but it is clear that the growth of the church in Alexandria, and the consequent influence of Christians, inflamed public opinion and the anger of a mob who reputedly dragged Mark through the street and the cattle market with a rope around his neck until his life was ended. What is important for us today is not how or where Mark died but how he lived and why he died a martyr’s death.

Just over two centuries later, in the era of Constantine when another African leader, Augustine of Hippo, was embracing the emperors’ use of power to suppress heretics and preserve the true faith, Lactantius, a Berbe African and quite possibly a descendent of one of Mark’s early converts in Libya, stuck firmly to the African tradition of patient witness, writing, “Religion must be defended not by killing but by dying, not by violence but by patience”⁵⁹ Two millennia later the world watched, half in horror and half in faith, as, in the sands of the desert outside Sirte in Libya, twenty one Coptic Christians patiently knelt in silent witness to await their martyrdom at the hands of terrorist executioners. The cord that binds together St. Mark the evangelist, the Berbe teacher Lactantius and the Coptic workmen from Sirte is the single strand of witness and martyrdom – *mártyras*.

Conclusion

In the second half of this paper I have attempted to pick up some of the major themes of Mark’s life which I see as having relevance for the mission of the Church – Orthodox and evangelical – in Africa today. Migration, Youth, Witness, Partnership, Spirit, Church Planting and Martyrdom are all live issues for the fastest growing Christian continent today – the Christian family which is most likely to shape the future of global Christianity in this twenty-first century. As I indicated at the start I strongly believe that African Christians will be better served in their leadership of Christian futures by the recovery of early African spirituality, patterns of discipleship, theology and history than by any post-colonial acceptance, rejection or critique of Western Christianity. Mark, the evangelist, witness and martyr is as good a place to start as any.

I want to conclude this paper with a more substantive quotation from Thomas Oden’s earlier book, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* because it so effectively turns the tables and challenges Western Christians to take seriously the African Christian heritage. He writes,

The rapid spread of early African Christianity was due in part to the heartbreaking African history of martyrdom. This is a history of African blood on African soil. For African believers the martyrs pointed to the continuity of the communion of saints. They bore their cross in Africa. They evoked a luminous awareness of their relation with esteemed ancestors. ... The readiness to die for the sake of the truth is intrinsic to baptismal faith. In fact, it is the core meaning of baptism as a participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord of glory. There is a kind of temporary vindication that

⁵⁹ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.19.22 (Bowen and Garnsey, 324)

comes from winning a short-term historical battle [even two centuries of colonisation]. But that does not account for the faith of multiple generations of witnesses following Jesus and Mark. ... The meaning of the struggle of the early African martyrs begs to be understood in modern Africa. It was a countercultural, risk-laden, sacrificial, pre-Constantinian struggle for integrity in the face of over-whelming political power. ... It was amid that period of martyrdom that the teachings of African orthodoxy were decisively refined. It was in that context that Africa gave birth to the enduring ecumenical doctrines of creation, providence, sin, atonement, resurrection and the church – its liturgy, eucharistic life, teaching and discipleship, refined by the fires of African experience. Living towards eternal life through death became the experiential basis for translating the Christian gospel into African terms.⁶⁰

Mark Oxbrow
Oxford Centre for Mission Studies
October 2019

⁶⁰ Oden, T.O. *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Recovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*, Downers Grove, IVP Books, 2007, pp.115-120