

Sunday, May 1, 2016
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

The Gospel of St. Mark

Last Monday, April 25, was the feast of St. Mark the evangelist. The word “evangelist” is derived from the Greek word meaning “Good News” or “Gospel.” According to the Acts of the Apostles, St. Mark was a cousin of St. Barnabas, one of the leaders of the early Church. He accompanied St. Barnabas and St. Paul on their First Missionary Journey, though he left in the middle to go to Rome to visit St. Peter. Scholars believe St. Peter was one of the chief sources of his Gospel. St. Mark also seems to have personally known Jesus.

The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke were written at about the same time, around the fall of Jerusalem in 67 AD. St. Mark’s Gospel, however, is the earliest extant Gospel. It is also the shortest Gospel. The authors of Matthew and Luke rely on Mark’s Gospel as a primary source. All three Gospels also borrow from a lost Gospel. For this reason, these Gospels are called “synoptic” because “with one eye” they can easily be compared. In fact, compendiums or concordances exist which line up the similarities between these three Gospels. The Gospel of John is completely different and was written some thirty years later, towards 100 AD. Other Gospels existed at the same time, e.g., the Gospels of Thomas and Philip, but only these four are considered Scriptural.

The early Church had not intended to write the Gospels. Nor did Jesus seem to want any written account. Instead, he left the Eucharist as his “memorial.” The original followers of Jesus expected his imminent return or “parousia” and, therefore, felt no need to record his ministry for subsequent eras. The Church originally relied on “oral tradition” to recount the sayings and miracles of Jesus. This was the typical mode of transmission at the time. Most people could not read. The Gospels evidence this method as the numerous repetitions, word schemes, parables, and the homespun, commonplace language indicate. Thus, for example, in Matthew’s Gospel, the parables are all collected in chapter 13 and again in chapters 24 and 25. All the sayings of Jesus are organized in the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 through 7.

All the Gospels, in fact the whole New Testament, were written in Greek, the common language of the times. Only in the beginning of the fifth century did St. Jerome translate the Bible into Latin. This set a precedent which later prompted Martin Luther to translate the Bible into German and has inspired every contemporary translation since, echoing the command of Jesus “to spread the Good News to all the world.”