

Homily for April 25th: The Feast of St. Mark

At the turn of the first to second centuries, there was an early Apostolic Father named Papias. The Church historian Eusebius says he was a bishop around the time of St. Ignatius of Antioch, who was martyred in Rome, during the first decade of the second century.

Papias is important because he provides the earliest extant account of who wrote the Gospels. Eusebius preserves two verbatim excerpts from Papias on the origins of the Gospels, one concerning Mark and then another concerning Matthew.

On Mark, Papias cites John the Elder:

The Elder used to say: Mark, in his capacity as Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately as many things as he recalled from memory—though not in an ordered form—of the things either said or done by the Lord. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him. However Peter used to give his teachings in the form of brief stories, and shared them with Mark. Subsequently Mark wrote down some individual items just as he related them from memory, for he made it his one concern not to omit anything he had heard or to falsify anything.

That we have this record from Papias helps us to better understand why in this morning's Epistle Peter writes:

Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. 14 Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Why does Peter refer to the Church being in Babylon? For the Jewish people you will remember that Babylon was the place of exile for the Jews six hundred years before Peter wrote. He understood Nero's Rome to be a modern-day Babylon. But from this place of exile remarkable things happened. Peter and Mark became dear to each other. From Rome Peter was able to recount to Mark the events of our Lord's life which Mark then compiled in the earliest of the four Gospels. From Rome the message that is expressed at the end of the Gospel, when Jesus said "preach the Gospel to all creation", happened. Rome would become the beachhead from where the Gospel would go out to all the world. From Rome signs of wonders would accompany the Gospel so that the most powerful and most organized political machine the world had ever seen would not be able to thwart Jesus' mission. Indeed, the words Peter states towards the end of his letter came to fruition.

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

This is what happened with the early Church in Rome. The Christians there suffered greatly as we know from the megalomaniac machinations of Nero, who set the city of Rome on fire and blamed it on the likes of Peter and Mark. In ways that Peter never witnessed in his earthly life but would witness from heaven the Church was restored, supported, strengthened and established in Rome.

On this day we give thanks to the Lord for the part St. Mark played in this. Because of him we know the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of him we have a detail that no other Gospel contains. At the Arrest of Jesus St Mark writes:

A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, 52 but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

Scholars believe this is an autobiographical comment. Mark had been at the arrest of Jesus. Imagine how that experienced help to shape his life?

He knew throughout his life how the devil is like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. He witnessed this with Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane. And resist him Mark did, through the challenges, misunderstandings, sufferings and glory of life.

St Mark, pray for us, that like you, we will trust daily in Jesus and have confidence that the Gospel is indeed the Good News of Jesus.