

4.25.2021 The Feast of St. Mark (2 Timothy 4:1-11, 16-18)

This morning we sang a song of the saints of God... patient and brave and true, and the message of this hymn was clear. In fact, it was repeated in every verse. The first verse spoke about the saints of God and ended with the declaration: "I mean, God helping, to be one too." The second verse told us about the saints of God, and this verse ended with the statement: "There's not any reason, no, not the least, why I shouldn't be one too." Finally, the third verse described those saints we meet every day, and the song ended with this proclamation: "For the saints of God are just folk like me, And I mean to be one too."

Every Christian is called to be a saint, yet all too often hymns like these seem better suited for children, perhaps because of the fact that adults have spent years in the trenches, battling their own faults, fears, and failures. As time passes, it can be far more difficult to imagine ourselves being among the sacred company of the saints. As we read about their lives, we admire the way they love and serve God and their neighbor, but struggle to find concrete ways to make such a saintly life our own. One way we can tackle this problem, and make some real progress, is by studying the lives of the saints and focusing our attention on aspects of their lives that we can all relate to, be encouraged by, and then strive to emulate in our own lives. Remember, the Bible and these historical accounts of how the saints lived were written, as St. Paul tells us, "*for our instruction, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope*" (Romans 15:4). Hope for today, hope for tomorrow, and in the words of St. Peter: "*a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*" (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Hope and comfort are what we seek today as we celebrate the Feast of St. Mark. Hope and comfort are what we find today, when we realize that both the Bible and Church tradition portray St. Mark to be, like the song says, "just folk like me," a person who battled his own faults, fears, and failures, and by the grace of God, persevered; and found the healing and restoration that only our Savior Christ can provide.

The New Testament passage we read today is a letter that St. Paul wrote to Timothy shortly before Paul was martyred in Rome. You'll probably

remember the way Paul, the seasoned Apostle, Evangelist, and Missionary, encouraged this young minister named Timothy to *“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching”* (2 Timothy 4:2). Paul called on Timothy to guard the deposit of Faith (1 Timothy 1:14), to hand on what he’s received (2:2), to *preach the word*, because, Paul writes, referring to his death, *“I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing”* (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

The approaching death of St. Paul and the powerful words he wrote to Timothy are clearly the primary focus of our Second Lesson, a lesson that says very little about St. Mark on his feast day. This seems strange, but at the same time it reminds us that when we’re studying the Bible, it’s important to read every word carefully, prayerfully, and to remember the truth stated in 1 Timothy (3:16-17), *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”* It’s not only our favorite Bible verses, the most exciting stories, or the theme of a particular passage that’s important and relevant, it’s all Scripture, every word was *breathed out by God*, every word was written for our benefit and instruction.

With that thought in mind on this Feast of St. Mark, let’s stop for a moment to consider a verse of Scripture that we wouldn’t normally give much attention. After Paul wrote those solemn, yet hopeful words about his own death, he told Timothy to *“come to me quickly,”* and then said, *“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry”* (2 Timothy 4:9, 11). Those words, *“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry”* don’t sound unusual to us. We’d expect even St. Paul, one of the greatest heroes of the Christian faith, to reach out for help as the time of his death approaches, and who better to rely on than St. Mark, the evangelist, the missionary, the man who would, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, write one of the four Gospels of our Lord.

From our perspective, it makes sense for Paul to ask for Mark to come and minister with him, and to him, at the end of his life, because we see Mark as

one of the saints of God we sang about this morning. We think of St. Mark as “patient and brave and true,” and too often forget that the saints of God are “just folk like me,” people who’ve battled their own faults, fears, and failures. St. Mark was no exception to that rule. In fact, the book of Acts tells the story of Paul, Mark, and Barnabas setting out on their first missionary journey, and we learn that when they reached Perga, “*Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem*” (Acts 13:13). We aren’t told why Mark abandoned Paul and Barnabas and gave up on his own work as a missionary to return home, but what the Bible does confirm is that Paul was deeply hurt and very disappointed by Mark’s decision to leave. This fact is revealed later in the book of Acts when Paul and Barnabas are making a plan to return to the cities where they’ve preached. At that time Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them, but we read that “*Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them... and had not gone with them to the work,*” and that the “*contention became so sharp that they parted from one another...*” (Acts 15:36-39).

We can’t be certain of the reason why Mark abandoned the work he was called to do on that first missionary journey, but some commentators who’ve traced the path these men took have compared Mark to a soldier just out of basic training, who charges forward, hungry for battle, but when the bullets start to ‘ping’ he quickly makes his way to the rear. This comparison is made because this first missionary journey began in Cyprus, a place where Mark would’ve been among friends and other people who knew him, a culture where he would’ve been accepted. Mark was ready to be a missionary, a soldier for Christ, a saint of God in a place where the work was relatively easy and there was no real danger or hardship, but when they reached Perga he’d seen enough, and returned to his mother’s home in Jerusalem.

The saints of God are “just folk like me,” and when I think of Mark in Perga, ready to go home because he’s in a culture that isn’t responding to his message, a culture that’s even hostile to his message, I can’t help but think of our own missionary journey. Ours is a journey which began like St. Mark’s, among friends, in a country shaped by Christian doctrine and morality, but now, we’ve arrived in “Perga,” and with bullets landing all around us, the question is how will we choose to respond? Will we duck and run for cover, will we quickly make our way to the rear, or will we stand and fight the good fight of faith?

In the passage we read this morning, St. Paul wrote to Timothy, “*Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.*” Those words are filled with hope, comfort, and encouragement for anyone who longs to be counted among the saints of God, because those words remind us of the truth that our failures are not the end of our story. St. Mark clearly failed early on in his journey, but at the end of St. Paul’s life, Mark was a man *useful to me for ministry*. In Mark’s example we see that the past is no indicator of what the future may be, because the man who began his journey by running away from danger and difficulty, ended up being a saint, a martyr, and an evangelist who would, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, proclaim to the entire world, The Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, according to St. Mark.