

ST MARK'S DAY

ST HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON

9 April 2026



Acts 15.35-41 / Ephesians 4.7-16 / Mark 13.5-13

'Beware that no one leads you astray.'

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

LEGEND HAS IT THAT ST MARK was Peter's godson, and that he served St Peter as his secretary. Mark was, on this account, from a Levitical priestly lineage, but because of his great humility he cut off one of his thumbs, so that he not be considered able to function as a priest. (I know of no explanation for how he functioned as a *secretary* without a thumb, but presumably it wasn't the thumb on his writing hand.) When St Peter took Mark with him to Rome, the Roman followers of Peter begged that Mark write down all that Peter preached about Jesus, and that became what we now know as 'Mark's Gospel'. Eventually St Peter sent Mark to Alexandria as the first person to preach the gospel to the Alexandrians; he was such a great preacher that many pagans adopted the faith of Christ and through the influence of Mark's holiness, they lived like monks, talking about little other than Jesus. Eventually as Bishop of Alexandria, St Mark drew so many people to Christ that one Easter Day jealous pagans conspired against him, tied him by the neck and dragged him through the streets of the city over the rough paving-stones, finally relegating him, bleeding and barely alive, to a prison cell. That night, an angel visited him to assure him that Christ was with him in his suffering; and the next day, when the mob hauled him out of the cell to torture him again, he cried 'Into thy hands Lord, I commend my spirit,' and he died, exemplifying the words of Jesus in this morning's Gospel lesson, 'He who endures to the end shall be saved.' The brutal pagans wanted

to burn his body in a bonfire, but God sent a great hailstorm (with thunder and lightning) such that everyone ran for shelter, except some holy men who retrieved Mark's remains and buried them in the cathedral at Alexandria.

*Legend* has it.

Many other stories are told of St Mark: the time he healed a cobbler's wounded hand, and how two merchants stole his body from the cathedral — presumably for the *best* of reasons — and brought it to Venice, how St Mark's intervention cured a young man of cancer, how he saved the life of a worker who fell from the tower of St Mark's Basilica by directing the falling man into the branches of a nearby tree, how he protected a would-be pilgrim to Venice from torture at the hands of his cruel master, and so on and so forth. As befits one of the four great evangelists, St Mark — during his mortal life and through his heavenly favour — accomplished great miracles on behalf of the Christian faith.

Now, I've emphasised that these are *legends* since we have no way of knowing whether any of these things *happened*, or if they happened in the *way* that the stories tell them. Some points are relatively certain: it seems likely that the *reputed* remains of St Mark were stolen from Alexandria and brought to Venice, although one may doubt that the Alexandrians felt especially charitable about that translation. It *could be* that Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome, but we should be honest that we don't even know whether the person who wrote that gospel was even *named* 'Mark', much less what post code he lived in while he was writing it. Mark's Gospel depicts Peter as especially dunderheaded; *maybe* that humble first vicar of Christ insisted that his secretary depict him as ill-suited to exercise spiritual authority, but *maybe* there was no connection between Peter and Mark whatsoever. And we won't even get started on all the posthumous miracles. As I say in this week's newsletter, these stories sound less like strictly documentary news reports and more like *fan fiction* written by devotedly enthusiastic supporters of St Mark.

That candid assessment, though, contrasts with many believers' unshakeable determination that they reflect actual, factual events whose extraordinary tenor *demonstrates* the truth of our faith, and *fulfils* Jesus's own promise that if we have even the least smidgen of faith we could uproot mountains and cast them into the sea. And if we wonder why, if dramatic miracles may so readily be accomplished with even mustard-seed faith, one hears of so few prominent miracles these days among *millions* of Christians among whom at least *some* have a wee dram of faith, we hear that the problem lies in our own *lack* of faith, our *lowered expectations*, our *resignation* to dull lives vested in policies and governments rather than in the untamed Holy Spirit that bloweth where it listeth and brings to pass even greater things than we can ask or imagine. St Mark even *tells us* that Jesus himself *could do* no deed of power in his home town among people who thought of him only as their neighbour Mary's oldest boy.

But in a few minutes, when we share in affirming the church's Creed, we will not say anything about mustard seeds moving mountains. That's not because back in 325, the all the bishops of that first ecumenical council had already decided that miracles had stopped; there were still wonder-working saints among them, and the *Golden Legend* (from which I've drawn the stories I recounted about Mark) includes reports of miracles continuing to the very day of the author's writing in the 13th century. We hear of miracles *today*, some of us may have *experienced* healing or deliverance through the intercession of our Lord, or of a favourite saint. That doesn't mean that everything in the *Golden Legend* is factually true, but neither does the *rarity* of apparent miracles mean that all such reports amount to nothing but a load of dingos' kidneys. The proof of the gospel does not hang on the *abundance* of miracles, nor does a modern scientific age *pre-empt* the possibility of unique events when transcendence collides with everyday existence.

To pick up a clue from earlier on, these sorts of story — *fan fiction* from

Star Trek enthusiasts, *midrash haggadah* from medieval rabbis, *family traditions* from descendants and relatives — flourish where people *so love* the characters about whom they're talking that the stories they tell express that love not *just* in fond memories and precise measurements, but also in the *magnitude* of the stories themselves. My father was, as a child, struck by an automobile when he was crossing a street. When his own father, who grew up in a staunchly Yankee New England ethos of stoic endurance and autonomy, came out of the house to ask if his son had been hurt, my dad said 'I'm okay' and limped back to the house after his father. When the pain didn't go away, when his afflicted leg swelled and bruised, and they *finally* went to a doctor, the X-rays showed that his leg had been seriously broken. Now, I don't know for certain how badly Dad's leg was injured. I don't know how impassive my grandfather was when he saw Dad lying in the street. I don't know a *lot* of things about this story, but the details *may easily* have been *amplified* by my outrage and affection for my father and grandfather, or by their trauma *and affection* for one another, and for me in their re-telling of their narrative. It operates not as an entry in family medical records, but as a description of the character (and I may add, a certain *pathology*) of the men in my line of descent — myself included. We retell the story in a spirit of amazement and affection and indeed as a *cautionary warning* about pig-headed reluctance to seek urgent medical treatment, but we don't stop telling it. It's who my *Grandpapapa* was, who my *Dad* was, and it is (I'm embarrassed to admit) who *I* am.

The legends about St Mark, and about my family, *deceive* us only when we confuse ardent expressions of pious love for statistical records of medical intervention, or the health and safety accident reports for a Venetian basilica, or even about whether a bloke by the name of Marcus knew St Peter, or wrote that gospel at all. But we don't *need* to *fret* about whether these count as *facts*, since we trust a Church that includes both *fervent devotees* and Thomas-like show-me *evidence hounds*. 'We must no longer be

children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But *speaking the truth in love*, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the *whole body*, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped... promotes the body's growth in building itself up in *love*. We're *all* better off if we stick together, if we acknowledge that science-seekers don't know *everything*, and that marvel fans may sometimes get carried away. Beware that no one leads you astray, but do study carefully the evidence concerning the composition of Scripture and the lives of the saints, and at the same time *revel* (if you can) in the ripping yarns by which the church celebrates the exceptional holiness of St Mark —

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit —

*Amen*