

Today the Church celebrates and gives thanks for the author of the gospel which most (but not all) scholars believe to be the earliest of the four canonical gospels to be written. Since the second century the author has been named 'Mark', and has been identified with one or more of those with that name in New Testament writings – among them the John Mark mentioned in Acts as a companion of Paul and Barnabas, and the one called *my son Mark* in the first letter of Peter. There are two principal traditions about him. The first says that he had been the assistant of Saint Peter in Rome, and had written down accurately all that he remembered of Peter's teaching. The other claims that he preached in Alexandria and was martyred there, Coptic Orthodox Christians honour him as their first bishop.

Later legend claims that in the ninth century Venetian merchants smuggled his body out of Alexandria and brought it to Venice, where he became the greatest of the city's patrons. Like the other three evangelists, Mark has been assigned one of the 'four beasts of the apocalypse' as an emblem – his being the Lion. The most common reasons are that Mark's gospel begins in the desert and / or that the preaching of John the Baptist was like the roaring of a lion. But none of this – interesting though it may be – tells us anything about the Gospel itself. It used to be thought of – in contrast to the other three – as a straightforward account of the life of Jesus. But modern scholars consider it to be a deeply theological work, and its author probably the 'inventor' of the literary form 'gospel'. One third of the work is devoted to the last week of our Lord's life – a pattern followed by the other evangelists. It lays great stress on the need for the Son of Man to suffer on the cross, and for his disciples to follow him in this – *Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* [Chapter 8 verse 34].

Most scholars believe that both Matthew and Luke made use of a written copy of Mark's gospel, and date it somewhere between AD 64 (traditional date of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul) and AD 70 (date of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple). The gospel was written to encourage a Christian community – perhaps in Rome – to remain faithful in the face of persecution.

We pray for all who in our day face suffering for confessing faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.