

Fifth Sunday of Easter 2016 Evensong

Mark 1: 1 – 15

Just in case you're wondering why, on the fifth Sunday of Easter, we're getting a New Testament lesson from the first chapter of Mark – the sort of reading you might associate with Advent or Lent rather than the Easter season – it's because tomorrow is St. Mark's day; and this reading is set because it's the Eve of that feast.

What we have is the prologue to Mark's Gospel. There's an old adage, isn't there, that to communicate effectively you've got to tell people what you're going to say, say it, and then tell people what you've said. These 15 verses that we've had this evening are Mark telling us what it is he's going to say. And well he might, because we might not realise what the Gospel is all about unless he warned us first.

That's because Mark's Gospel is shrouded in secrecy, a deliberate secrecy. One feature of this Gospel is often referred to as the Messianic secret. The fact that Jesus is the Messiah is hushed up. If a person or a demon identifies Jesus as the Messiah, they're promptly silenced; and the disciples, well: the disciples in Mark's Gospel are too obtuse to work out who Jesus is. They don't get a good press at all.

Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four Gospels and is written with an economy of expression. There's no padding out, there's no birth narrative and resurrection is dealt with in what might be described as a quite peremptory way. Scholars reckon that, in its original form, Mark simply has the women going to the tomb, finding the stone rolled away, and meeting an angel who told them to go and tell Peter Jesus was risen. Subsequent editors have added a few verses' worth of resurrection appearances to that, but not that many of them.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

So well may Mark have prefaced his account with this prologue which spells out for us what it is we're going to hear. It leaves us with a wonderful summary of who Jesus is and what he's about. And it's all good news. The very first sentence is "The beginning of the *gospel* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." – Actually, I know there are too many retired English teachers around to let me get away with calling that a sentence: it's a Tony Blair sort of sentence: it's a verb-less sentence! When Simon Hoggart was writing Parliamentary sketches for the Guardian, he used to count up the number of sentences in Tony Blair's speeches that didn't have verbs. I'm sure he'd have made satirical short shrift of Mark's Gospel as well – but the point is that this verb-less verse tells us that it's *gospel*, it's good news – that's what the word means: *gospel/good-news*.

And it's good news because it's about Jesus Christ. The messianic secret, which shrouds the rest of the book, is out of the bag in the first sentence. Jesus is

the Christ. He is Christ, none other than God's-self in human form. So when he begins his earthly ministry we're dealing with more than an impressive teacher; we're dealing with more than a wonderful healer; we're dealing with more than a charismatic leader: we're dealing with the Kingdom of God.

And the Kingdom of God needs some preparing for. Because you're not ready for the Kingdom of God when you get involved with the sort of interpersonal bungling the likes of you and me get mixed up in day after day; when there's hatred and violence; when children lose their sight for want of clean drinking water; when people seeking refuge from conflict are rejected; when the vulnerable and poor are demonised; when the gap between rich and poor gets inexorably wider; when the planet is hurtling towards destruction because our greed exceeds our respect for the integrity of God's creation.

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It's because that's the reality of what life's like that Mark's prologue – this summary of what the gospel's about – devotes such attention to repentance and baptism. John prepared for Jesus by baptising people confessing their sins. Jesus shows his complete identification with us by himself being baptised. And when he began his earthly ministry he told people to repent.

It seems to me we need to capture the significance of the on-going implications of living as baptised people. We tend to look on baptism as being an event, something which happens at the outset, either in our infancy or as a result an adult experience of spiritual renewal. But what I repeat month after month to all the people who come here and present their children to be baptised is that it's not about getting baptised: it's about becoming a baptised person. It's about living in a relationship continually repenting.

The danger is that if we talk about repentance we just send people on a guilt trip and leave them in a state of being emotionally and psychologically stunted. But if we talk about being continually reminded of our baptisms it helps us to look on repentance as an invitation to put ourselves in a place to receive God's free, unconditional gift of his grace.

Grace is the spiritual condition of living in anticipation of the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God: to live for peace and justice and in integrity with creation. And the good news is that all that is just an act of repentance away.

Amen.