

**Fifth Sunday of Easter 2019 (19.05.19)**

**Daniel 6: 6 – 23; Mark 15: 46 – 16: 8**

Now let me just confess that my guilty TV pleasure is Gogglebox on a Friday night. I hope that surprises you! It certainly doesn't represent the sort of image I want to cultivate for myself, but that fact of the matter is that, when we're in choir practice on a Friday night I'm just willing Mr Smith not to go on too long - not because of my lack of commitment to Priory Choir you understand – but just because I'm anxious to be back in the Rectory for when Gogglebox starts.

And the thing about Gogglebox is that it's sponsored by Suzuki Swift. Far be it from me to make any jokes about Suzuki Swifts. I know some very fine people who drive them. The way the promotion of Suzuki Swifts works is that at the beginning and end of each advert slot, it shows you two women watching Suzuki Swifts manoeuvring and commenting as if they're watching a TV drama. And there's one where the

driver drives off leaving their cup on the car roof. And one woman says to the other "Ooh, that's a cliff hanger!"

The whole point of that long-winded disclosure of what goes on behind the closed doors of the Rectory on a Friday night is just to introduce the idea of a cliff hanger. Because our Gospel reading from Mark's Gospel ends with the greatest cliff hanger in Scripture. If you were following the Gospel in the pew Bible, you will know that there's about a page worth of Mark's Gospel left after our reading finishes. But scholars reckon that all those verses have been added by editors in subsequent generations who just couldn't hack the way the original text finishes on a cliff hanger. They felt they just had to add something to resolve it.

The way Mark's Gospel originally ended was with the words "[T]hey went out and fled from the tomb . . . and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." So what happens next? Does Jesus die and rise again

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all for nothing because nobody says anything about it to anyone else, or do those disciples conquer their fear and start spreading a message that eventually becomes a world-wide religion? We know the answer from other sources. But Mark's Gospel just leaves us wondering. What happens next? Does anything happen next?

It would have been perfectly understandable if nothing had happened next. Jesus had got himself killed. It's perfectly reasonable not to want to identify yourself with a cause that invites persecution. The most sensible, the most reasonable thing, the most rational thing would have been to put the previous three years down to experience and just try to pick up where they had left off as if all this talk of the Kingdom of God coming near, not to mention trippy stuff with angels telling them he had been raised from the dead had never happened.

Many commentators suggest that this cliff hanger of an ending invites us, the reader, to put ourselves in the position of those disciples. Would we have done the sensible, reasonable, rational thing? Or would we have had the courage to stand up for the truth that had been revealed to us through Christ?

We may well wonder. But we know what Daniel did when his faith exposed him to the risk of persecution. Daniel in the lions' den, of course, is a favourite Sunday School story from the Bible. It's a rollicking good story that's got everything in it to capture a child's imagination. I remember singing the Daniel Jazz quite early on at school. It's great fun!

But Daniel in the lions' den is actually far more than a fun child's Bible story. It's a deadly serious story about what people of faith do in the face of persecution. And we know what Daniel did. Daniel was prepared to die for his faith. The disciples of Jesus – those giants of the early church hand-picked by Jesus himself – on

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the face of Mark's Gospel were at first, at the very best, ambivalent about it, and didn't immediately rise to the prospect of martyrdom. And we're left wondering how we would respond – not a St. Peter, not a St. Andrew, not a St. James, not a St. John, but just ordinary folk moggling along in Brid.

And well we may wonder. Because religious persecution is rife. And persecution of Christians is rife. Already in 2019 Christians have been massacred in the Philippines and in Sri Lanka. For some reason, though, I feel uncomfortable admitting and talking about the fact that Christians are persecuted. And I struggle to work out why. I think it might be something to do with colonialism, but I'm not quite sure what. I've got to work that one through.

But partly it is something to do with not wanting to associate myself with people from the British equivalent of the American Religious Right who deliberately manipulate situations, setting up straw

men, making out that we live in a hostile, anti-Christian, liberal secular environment and trying to define Christianity, and draw attention to Christianity, by its resistance those forces. So someone has to wear a uniform at work. And they insist on pushing against the boundaries of the uniform policy by insisting on wearing a cross on their lapel. And when they are told they're not allowed to do so they cry martyr and try to whip up sympathy and support for Christianity as if it's being persecuted by a liberal establishment that's seeking to curtail freedom of religious expression. But Christians don't have to wear cross lapel badges at work. It's not required of our religious observance to do so. And to suggest otherwise is a distortion of the principle of martyrdom. Martyrdom is putting the glory of God before your own safety. It is not manufacturing a cause celebre.

But, for all that, there is real persecution. And we do need to ponder what we would be prepared to die for. Not all things are worth dying for. You have to choose

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your ditch to die in. It is worth trying to think through where the threshold is beyond which we should be prepared to accommodate no further, but rather be prepared to be thrown to the lions. It is a worthy, and indeed important cliff hanger on which to be left dangling.

Amen.