

Easter 4
26/4/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 85
Mark 1:1-15

Christ our beginning and end

There seems to be a general consensus that the beginning is a very good place to start: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”; so begins the book of Mark the Gospeller.

Beginnings, however, are rather less straightforward than we usually imagine. There are, in fact, no true beginnings in history. There was always something before what we choose as a beginning, so that – were we to be comprehensive – we would have to push back the start as far as our historical knowledge could reach. But, in fact, we don’t do this. While everything really begins somewhere prior to the beginning we choose, we nevertheless do *choose*: we do identify and magnify certain points within history as somehow being “the beginning” in a special kind of way.

In this process, what is likely to be less clear to us is that in such a naming of a beginning we are not so much identifying where things start as identifying the end from which we take our view of the beginning. The beginning is what creates us ourselves. The beginning we choose is chosen because it speaks *us* – not only speaks *to* us but speaks us, announces us, relates us. If a history and a starting place do not do this, then they are someone else’s story and not ours.

In the last few weeks, of course, and more intensively in the last few days, we have been reflecting as a community on the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli. Among the many angles of reflection, there has been no small amount written on this event as an Australian beginning. The language is sometimes quite extreme, and has been challenged from a different quarters, but it conveys the thought that this event defined the spirit of the nation. The event itself, and the way those soldiers conducted themselves, constituted the arrival of the nation on the world stage. In all sorts of often quite surprising ways, the ANZAC spirit is seem somehow to reflect what is “typically” Australian – even to have been the genesis of these characteristics. In this way they were us – our beginning – because we are them. Our Prime Minister remarked yesterday: “If they had not been emblematic of the nation we thought we were [read: “are”], Anzac Day would not have been commemorated from that time until this.” There is something fundamentally “us” behind the commemoration, and so it lends itself to serve as our “beginning”.

Whatever might be said about the continuing remembrance of the Gallipoli campaign, the point here is simply what sits behind the choice which is exercised in selecting this event as somehow being definitive and so somehow constituting a beginning: in this way we note *ourselves*.

What, then, of Mark’s sense for a beginning: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”? All that we have just noted about the choice of a beginning applies also in this beginning: this, too, is a choice about where the beginning is. In the opening passage there are intimations of other, prior events – the preaching of the prophet Isaiah anticipating John; the echo of the even earlier Elijah in John’s mode of

dress; and perhaps even of the very creation event itself echoed in the movement of the Spirit over the waters of Jesus' baptism (Genesis 1.1f).

Yet the beginning Mark chooses is the appearance of Jesus on the scene and the first thing we hear on his lips: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

If the need to choose a beginning – as Mark does – is a matter of expressing something of ourselves, expressing something of the end which is reflected in that beginning, how is that the case for Mark? What is the end – the goal – identified, chosen, in *this* beginning?

It is, again, us: Mark himself, or those to whom he writes – we are the end in mind here. The evangelist Mark writes to a community which is itself the fruit of the gospel which begins here. In the first instance it was a particular community: largely Gentile, probably in Rome, small in the face of the over-whelming presence of all things Roman, apparently under increasing persecution in the early to mid '60s. Some interpreters read the famous calming of the storm episode in chapter 4 as being a word about – and to – this little community, tossed about on the waves by seemingly irresistible forces of criticism and persecution, crying out to God, "Do you not care that we perishing?" (Mark 4.38).

The "beginning" which is the appearance and proclamation of Jesus makes sense of the identity and experience of that small community believers. They are different, off-centre. They are marginal to the dominant narratives which spring from different beginnings and imply different endings. As Palestine was marginal and problematic to the vast Roman world, so also are they, although living in the very heart of Rome itself. As wild-eyed crazy as the Baptist appears in his desert ministry, calling people away from the relatively safe city into the dangers of the desert with its "wild beasts" (1.12), so are these believers seen to be odd, eccentric. For this message – this gospel – speaks of a different centre. Just as the more jingoist readings of the ANZAC event see it as a characterisation of the Australian spirit – the centre of our identity – so for Mark the way the gospel begins characterises the community which is now formed by that beginning.

And just as any rampant nationalism, or fanatical extremism, or political ideology sees itself as finally arriving at the goal of human history – the "filling up" of history in this particular way of being human – so also Mark's Jesus announces "the time is fulfilled" (1.15). Now, finally, it comes to completion.

And, yet, it is a strange "completion", for it is an "incomplete completion". This is because the filling up of the time takes shape in the creation of something which is *not* yet at its end, its perfection: the church itself – that community which sees its particular present springing from this beginning. For, despite occasional triumphalist outbursts, the church is scarcely "complete"; the very writing of the gospel itself as an encouragement to a troubled church is evidence of this, quite apart from the inadequacies of the church more obvious to us today.

The church's end *is* in this beginning, but it is not there yet. This is because of the strangeness of this particular beginning: its call to *repentance*. This repentance is no mere turning from this or that "sin", no mere saying "sorry". It is, as the English word itself implies (re-pent : re-think), a re-thinking: a re-perceiving of what matters. This call to *re*-imagine ourselves and our future is an address to us who tend towards crystallising a particular sense of what it means to be human. These crystallisations are

hardening, exclusions of other possibilities. It happens, continually, in churches as it happens in nations. In these imaginings of ourselves we imply that we have already reached what it means to be whole and human. Or, in the terms which Jesus uses, we imply that we have already reached “the kingdom”: God’s kingdom has come, and we are the proof of it. It is this sense of completeness in ourselves which drives us to conflict with each other: the claims we presume to make on others on account of their being less, or deserving less, than we because our beginning, our end, are the “true” beginning and end.

But the kingdom of God – our completion – has not yet come: we are not complete. As then, so now, this world “draws near” in the person of Jesus in whom alone there is a true beginning and a true end, and who calls us out of parochialisms, nationalisms, triumphalisms and the self-righteousness which justify selfishness and give rise to fear. We are called from our sense of our own perfection and the narrow beginnings from which this sprang to a beginning and an end which is not yet quite ours, but the approach of which is announced in order to *unravel* us a bit.

Our first reading this morning was taken from Isaiah:

*How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news.*

This announcement of peace in Mark’s gospel takes the form of the approach of a God who calls us out of our firm and fixed identities and centres into something as yet unimagined. This may not seem good news at first, and indeed Mark’s gospel is filled with shock and awe as the world meets the surprising, disorienting liberty Jesus brings. But it is *liberty* – a liberation from the powers and principalities which hold us in thrall and cause us to imagine that we need to distance ourselves from, or even kill, each other, and can then bless that as a beginning.

We give thanks, then, for Mark and for all who have told the story of this strange one in whom our beginnings and endings are re-worked to bring life and freedom.

May God’s people grow ever more fully into that story, becoming themselves new beginnings and endings which testify to where life and liberty are to be found. Amen.
