

Easter 5
29/4/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 98
Mark 1:1-14

A Gospel for Misfits

Where to start a story?

Each of the four gospels has a different opinion on this. John begins, ‘in the beginning’ – *the* beginning: in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Luke begins a little more recently, with a genealogy of Jesus commencing from Adam as the beginning of history. Matthew also has a genealogy, although his begins mid-history with Abraham. And Mark begins with a voice crying out on the desert, Make way, get ready, brace yourself.

These gospel beginnings don’t vary simply as a matter of arbitrary choice. John’s opening cosmic vision is reflected in the way Jesus moves through his narrative: the way he engages, the language he uses, the sense he bears of his place in the order of things. Luke’s beginning with the progenitor of all humankind reflects his account of Jesus as Lord of all – the Jew and the Gentile, the ‘in’ and the ‘out’. Matthew’s launch from Abraham places Jesus firmly in Israel’s salvation history – a gospel to which the Jews ought to be able to say, Yes.

And Mark’s Jesus is announced on the lips of a crazy man in the desert. You don’t see his Jesus coming – not out of the cosmos, not out of the sweep of human history. Mark’s Jesus comes, as it were, from nowhere.

And, as for the other gospel writers so also for Mark: this is not accidental. The left-field arrival of ‘the Lord’ (1.3) reflects how he appears throughout Mark’s account. This is a gospel filled with surprise, wonder, amazement and fear from the demons, the crowds, the disciples and Jesus’ enemies. ‘What are you doing here?’ the demons cry out (1.24). ‘What is this, a new teaching?’ the crowds ask in amazement (1.27). ‘We have never seen anything like this’ (2.12). ‘They were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this?”’ (4.41). ‘They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid’ (10.32).

Jesus misfits all expectations. This continues right through to Easter Day when we hear of the women’s response to the empty tomb: ‘...they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid’ (16.8)

Mark’s Jesus is one of Shock and Awe, but it is shock and awe with a purpose, with a resonance. The dislocating nature of Mark’s Jesus reflects the dislocated character of the community to whom he writes. Reading between the lines of the gospel – imagining that those to whom Mark writes would see themselves in the stories he chose to tell – we discern a people in dire need. They are buffeted on the high seas of life (cf. 4.35-41), possessed and directed by a legion of powers beyond and within themselves (cf. 5.1-13), at a loss to understand how what matters so much could possibly be destroyed (cf. 8.31-33; 9.30-32), doubting that anyone can finally be saved (10.23-27), and unable to stick with the one for whom their hearts once burned (cf. 14.29-31, 50, 66-72).

Mark presents a strange Jesus to those estranged – estranged from God, from each other, from their very selves. In more ‘theological’ language, Mark presents an irreconcilable Jesus to an unreconciled people – a Jesus who does not fit for a people who don’t fit.

How does the irreconcilable reconcile? By being the word which, though not *expected*, is *needed*. The curious thing about the amazement and fear which surrounds Jesus in Mark’s account is that it is caused precisely by Jesus bringing what is needed: the liberating teaching, the healing, the exorcism, the steadfastness before the powers that be – the penetrating sense of a fearless life and the light it brings. It is the *good* news which shakes everyone up. So confused are we to begin with that receiving the things we need confuses even more.

And yet, it *is* the good which Jesus brings. In view of this Jesus asks, then and now, ‘Why are you afraid; have you no faith?’ (4.40) or, perhaps more to the point, ‘Do you not see?’

It is the reign of God which is drawn near here; think again, and believe the good news (1.14).

From Isaiah this morning we heard

^{52.7} How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’

Beautiful indeed those feet, because the word of peace is not one we expect. It does not flow from the cosmos, it does not mature out of human history, it does not come even from ‘possessing’ the promises of God.

And *yet*, it comes. ‘Do not fear,’ Jesus says, ‘only believe’ (5.36). Believing means expecting what we see no reason to expect: that in the midst of the chaos God might meet us bringing, if not yet *order*, peace. And we will be amazed.

How beautiful the feet of Mark the Evangelist, who announces this peace. How blessed the ears which hear him.
