

Second Sunday in Lent 2021

Mother Emma

This year in Lent, the group who meet every day for Morning Prayer, have decided to extend their Monday session, in order to study Rowan Williams' excellent short book, "Meeting God in Paul". It helps to set in context the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, and also offers some helpful questions for group or private reflection. (If you are interested in joining this group on Zoom, please contact Mother Alice.)

It has reminded me that Rowan Williams had also written a similar book entitled "Meeting God in Mark," – very relevant to this year in which our readings are largely based around readings from Mark's Gospel. This would also make a very good book for personal Lenten study, as reflecting more broadly on Mark as a writer and evangelist gives us a great background for listening to the Marcan readings Sunday by Sunday with increased attention and understanding.

Rowan Williams' thesis is that Mark's whole Gospel points us unequivocally towards the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus; the rest of Jesus' life - his miracles, healings and even teaching play a far less significant role in Mark than in Matthew or Luke. So, in these forty days of Lent, as we prepare our hearts and minds to make that journey through Holy Week with Christ, looking towards, and then sharing in Good Friday, it is also very appropriate that we should focus, as today's reading does, upon the Cross. For Rowan Williams, Mark's Gospel is about the extraordinary nature of God, and of Christ's victory on the Cross - over Satan and over death, a victory which completely turns our human understanding of success and power on their heads. The Jesus described in Mark will overcome death and bring in God's kingdom, not through success in the eyes of the world, but through humiliation and abject failure.

In Mark's Gospel, there is no description of Jesus' Nativity, no angels, stars or kings, simply the introductory words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God", and we are straight into the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, and the beginning of his journey to the Cross.

Mark's Jesus does heal the blind, the lame, and the demon-possessed, but in each case, he asks them not to tell anyone – his time has not yet come. Rowan Williams suggests that Jesus almost cannot help himself from healing out of compassion, but this is not the main purpose of his Incarnation.

As he tells Peter, he comes to suffer and to die; to put aside everything that human beings aspire to, and to die the death of the lowest kind of criminal on the Cross, abandoned by his own followers, denied by his closest friend, failed by the Jewish and Roman legal systems, despised by all.

It is in this overturning of our human understanding of power and success, demonstrating that God's power lies precisely in his ability to stand and to suffer alongside us, to be

present even in suffering and shame, that Rowan Williams sees the nature of Christ's work on the Cross.

As we see in our reading today, Mark's Jesus emphasises at every opportunity that God's ways are NOT human ways. The phrase from this reading "Get thee behind me, Satan!" has been assimilated deep into the English language. We say it cheerfully, and probably unthinkingly, to those who try to tempt us, perhaps offering us chocolate or alcohol during Lent.

In fact, it is far from a light-hearted thing to say, and Jesus' rebuke would have cut Peter to the quick. After all, all he was trying to do was to reassure his friend - who seemed to be dwelling rather excessively on the possibility of his own death - by suggesting things would probably turn out all right – as we might well have done ourselves in such a situation. Perhaps Peter was also trying to deter Jesus from lowering the morale of the other disciples, who believed they were travelling on a path to victory. But Jesus' extremely strong response is to tell Peter abruptly that he is setting his mind on human things, and not on the things of God, and his human concerns put him closer to Satan than to God.

Human beings are all driven by success criteria – in first-century Galilee, this involved avoiding shame and maintaining honour; in twenty-first century Britain, we are only too aware of the material wealth, social status, obvious achievements, perfect health or flawless beauty, which have been seen as the marks of success. The continual shocks of the past year, from major crises such as lockdown, redundancy, sickness and bereavement, to even the relatively insignificant closure of hair salons, gyms and clothes shops have raised barriers to the outward success and happiness society encourages us to pursue. Yet perhaps we have been able to see amidst the pain and loneliness of this Covid season, glimpses of a different kind of success and joy, as we have been reminded of the value of friendship, family, compassion and community, together with the hope and faith born out of suffering.

Mark is telling us that it is when we lay aside all our human aspirations, our success criteria, our judgments, and place everything into God's hands that we can truly achieve what God asks of us.

Jesus tells the disciples to stop focussing on success in human terms, if they want to attain the eternal life which God promises: "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" His message for us is this – as we allow ourselves to let go of the success criteria which drive us, and give ourselves up instead to the grace and power to be found in the heart of God himself, so we too will experience that entirely different power and glory which belong to him alone.

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." Amen