

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-14, Mark 16:9-16

The choice of Gospel reading made by the compilers of the Lectionary for Matins this morning is somewhat unusual and surprising.

As you might know, the Gospel of Mark offers two alternative endings – the shorter and the longer – and it is generally accepted that the longer version, from which our reading today is taken, was not actually written by St Mark himself, or at least certainly not at the same time as the rest of the Gospel. These final verses from the longer ending of Mark provide, in effect, a summary of all the stories we have been hearing and reflecting on over the past four Sundays of Eastertide, recorded across all the different Gospels.

It is not known who wrote this, or when, but clearly whoever it was felt that the traditional ending of Mark, in which we are told that the women fled from the tomb and from the angel who had spoken to them, too frightened to tell anyone what they had found, was somehow rather unsatisfactory. Mark's ending doesn't explicitly describe any of the Resurrection appearances; leaving it open to the reader or hearer to test their own faith in the angel's words to the women:

'Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you.'

The disciples – and by extent, we too – are being asked to return to their normal homes and lives following the news of the Resurrection, and there they will encounter the risen Christ. But the additional author clearly knew all the evocative stories of the disciples' subsequent encounters with Jesus after the Resurrection – as we do - and felt that they were needed here to give weight to Mark's account.

The Longer Version refers, in sequence, to the traditional Easter narrative from the Gospel of John, as Jesus encounters Mary Magdalene at the tomb; then to the stories of the disciples who doubted her. We hear an allusion to the two disciples who "walked and went into the country"; presumably the story of the meeting on the road to Emmaus recorded by Luke, on which Mother Alice preached to us on Easter Day, and next the story of Christ's appearing to the disciples in the locked room which we have also recently discussed.

Jesus' final command in this longer version is:

'Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.'

This might be a harsher interpretation of the commandment recorded in the Gospel of Matthew shortly before the Ascension:

'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...'

So is this extra addition to the Gospel simply an opportunity taken, to draw people's attention to the many wonderful, descriptive accounts of Jesus' appearances during the time between Easter and Ascension? Or does it reflect the human yearning for clarity, for proof, for certainty, for a preference not to have to spend time in our busy lives wrestling with difficult questions ourselves?

In finishing his Gospel in the place which most scholars believe he intended, with the frightened women running from the tomb, Mark is forcing us to think more deeply, to wonder ourselves exactly what happened that early dawn and during the night of Easter Eve. Does it lead us to hope or to trust that we too will encounter the risen Christ in our own day-to-day lives as we return to them after the mystery and glory of Easter Day, like the disciples returning to Galilee?

Mark might be encouraging his readers to think about the many promises made throughout the Old Testament, which promise a coming Messiah and glory dawning over Jerusalem.

Our first reading today, also perhaps somewhat surprising as we have, over the years, come to associate this lesson so much with Advent and Christmas Carol Services, reminds us of God's promises of the light which will overcome the darkness. Mark himself describes in his Passion, that as Jesus hung in Jerusalem on the Cross, *'... when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.'* Perhaps he hoped that people would remember the beautiful promises of the Lord shared by Isaiah with the inhabitants of Jerusalem: *'For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.'*

His probable original narrative leaves us to do the hard work; to reflect on what we know has been promised to us, and to search our own hearts faithfully for understanding and truth.

Some have argued that this passage may at the very least have been written by someone who followed in the Marcan tradition, as one element of the passage is reminiscent of Mark's view of the disciples. Mark, more than any of the other Evangelists, is constantly pointing out the disciples' failures; their inability to understand what they were witnessing and hearing, to put their trust fully in Jesus and to follow him in faith. The author of the longer version retains something of this as he includes the phrase which reflects much of Mark's thinking: *'[Jesus] upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart'* and he may be warning us not to follow their example.

But I wonder if his attempt to clarify Mark's story takes away something of the importance of working and experience the Resurrection for ourselves. Jesus, after all, often spoke in parables, to leave his hearers to come to understand his words in their own good time.

Perhaps we should not always seek to be given absolute clarity and certainty in our faith, but to be encouraged to think, to pray and to reflect, as we too come to recognize the power of the narrative which lies at the heart of our faith.

Amen

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