

Lent 2, 25th February 2024, Eucharist

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Romans 4: 13-end and Mark 8: 31-end

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I very rarely use a sermon as an opportunity for a book review, but as people often ask me about suitable reading for Lent, I would like to speak a little bit today about Rowan Williams' short book "*Meeting God in Mark*," – which I have been re-reading over my recent leave and would wholeheartedly recommend to anyone wondering how to fulfil their Lenten study of God's word, without requiring too much time.

Quite apart from the attraction of its short length (just 75 pages), this is a relevant and inspiring book for this Lent in many ways. 2018 was, of course, "Year B" in the lectionary – the year in which the majority of our Gospel readings are taken from the Gospel of St Mark (last year they were from Matthew, and next year will be from Luke). 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 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. But 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 would probably also 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 or flawless beauty, which are seen as the marks of success.

Every one of us is conscious of the demands set for us by society, authority or the overwhelming influence of social media. Speaking personally, clergy could well feel overwhelmed by the weighty charge read at our ordination: "*The treasure entrusted to you is Christ's own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross. It is to him that you will render account for your stewardship of his people.*" BUT the ordination service continues with the words, "*You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God.*"

This, of course, is the key for every human being, whatever their calling. Mark is telling us that it is when we lay aside all our human aspirations, our success criteria, our judgements 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, eternal glory which belong to him alone.

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