

Outwards from the Heart of Being (Mark 16: 1-8)

Easter Sunday

The reading we just heard constitutes the end of Mark's gospel – at least according to oldest manuscripts. The story introduced so confidently as the 'good news (proclamation) of Jesus, the Son of God', concludes abruptly with a tale of confused women fleeing an empty tomb; afraid to say anything to anyone. And that's it. The final words are '*ephobounto gar ...*' (lit. *they were afraid for*). No other work of literature in Greek ends with that little word 'gar', and the effect (which I'm sure you experienced) is to leave everything hanging, unresolved ... It's tantalizing! And a strange way, you'd think, to get a new religious vision off the ground. Or is it?

Let's step back for a minute. You'll recall that a notable feature of Mark's gospel is the notion of 'the Messianic secret'. This 'secret' concerns the identity of Jesus, and his reluctance (during his ministry) to say who he was. I've suggested this was because Jesus hadn't wanted to be seen primarily as a wand-waving miracle worker. He did care for and respond compassionately to human need, he healed the sick and cast out many demons, but always with the warning to keep quiet about it. It was only at his trial—bruised and bound, exposed, bleeding, and stripped of all power—that he finally broke with this silence and revealed his true identity. '*Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?*' the high priest asked. And Jesus replied: 'I am'. But, of course, they didn't believe. How could this beaten wretch have anything to do with God. And the irony doesn't end there.

Three days later, when women come to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, they're met by 'a young man', who tells them he's not there, that he's been raised. They're instructed to go and share this news with Peter and the other disciples. And here's the joke – '*they said nothing to anyone*'. All through the gospel, people are commanded not to tell, and they do. And now, at last, when commanded to say what they've heard and seen, '*they say nothing to anyone, for they were afraid*'.

'We are surely meant to pick up the paradox here', Rowan Williams writes (2014,48). At last, the message is clear: here, in the crucified Christ, is the event in

which God has changed the world ... and no one wants to talk about it!! It's too much of a shock ... Before his crucifixion, it'd been easy to gossip about him; all the words were there, ready-made... But now something has happened for which there are no ready-made words; something that doesn't fit any existing category. Indeed, how are we to talk about it? For it strikes me that, at this point, we're in a conundrum.

Over the past three days, we've confronted the gospel's witness that the face of God is most fully revealed in the crucified victim of human violence, and that the power of God is not the kind of power that steps down from heaven to solve our problems. Mark's testimony is that God is the crucified God, who shares our suffering; who chooses to be, and be manifest, at the 'lowest, weakest point of human experience' (61). But if that's true, then how does this God help? What difference can this God make?

This morning, we're told that Jesus has been raised. It turns out that he's *not* just a victim, another dead body in another of history's unmarked graves. But, while that goes some way to answering how he might help, it seems to falsify the claim that God's power is not what we thought – surely raising someone from the dead is precisely the kind of thing you'd expect a wand-waving divinity to get up to!!

So, what's it to be? Either God is crucified, suffering, identified with weakness – and so not much use to us. Or God is powerful, corpse raising and interventionist – and so not much with us. It's like we can't have it both ways ... or can we?

What if there's another way to perceive it? What if this journey of the Passion, is showing us something we hadn't known before about the radically transforming power of God's love; what if it's a love that wills to undergo, to share, to bear the beloved's pain; and that in so doing can work through the chains of sin, suffering and even of death, to bring about real wholeness; true reconciliation?

I offer that, because in the end, that's the story that Mark presents. The story of how Jesus – aka the indestructible love of God – works to liberate and restore the world, not from on high, from the outside in, but from the inside out –

‘outwards from the heart of being’ (is how Rowan Williams puts it). Which means it’s the story of a power that acts not to rescue but to transform, not to save us *from* the time of trial but to accompany us *in and through* it, to create new life. And if *that’s* the possibility that those women glimpsed that day, then no wonder they were seized by fear and amazement, no wonder they were dumbfounded (at least for a time).

I suggested earlier that Mark’s ending leaves us suspended. I used to think that the real ending had been cut or torn from the scroll. But I’m since convinced that this abrupt close is deliberate; Mark’s creative way of signaling that the story *doesn’t* end at this point. Here, we receive news of a radical new possibility for being (of life no longer menaced by the fear of death, rejection, and pain); here we’re greeted with the possibility of resurrection; a glimpse of freedom. And, left hanging, the question, will you entrust yourself?

‘This Gospel is a book about faith’, writes Williams (2014.70) ‘and more specifically about that fundamental aspect of faith which is the trustful letting go into a love that is completely surprising’. It’s tantalizing; terrifying!! Can we, dare we, will we believe it? Or will we run for fear it’s all just a naïve and silly dream? ‘*He is not here, he’s risen... he is going ahead of you*’; that’s the promise Mark ends with; the promise the church audaciously proclaims today. And, with that, it’s over to you and me ... ours to choose. Amen.