

20141207AdventII Sermon

"It was a dark and stormy night" I'm sure we have all heard this opening of a 1830 novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton and no doubt heard all the parodies on it, including Snoopy the cartoon dog typing his novel on the top of his kennel. The opening words of a story are important. If the writer doesn't get the reader hooked immediately, the book will be quickly tossed aside.

Mark seemed to know this technique when he began his Gospel with the words "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Now, that's an attention-grabber! But in fact all this week's readings carry the requirement of a brides - "something old and something new" in their content.

The story of Jesus is something "old" in the sense that it has continuity with what went before: the salvation story of the Old Testament. It continues Israel's history with God, or rather, God's history with them. That is why Mark points immediately back to the Hebrew Scriptures with the "as it is written ..." in v2. Yet it is also something absolutely new that eclipses anything that has gone before, and there will never be a sequel to it in the sacred texts of the community of faith.

The Lectionary links the gospel with two key Old Testament texts (Isaiah and Psalm 85) that deal with Israel's hope of deliverance and the merciful, saving character of God. Both are texts written while in exile, and signal God's deliverance. The psalmist says *You forgave the iniquity of your people : and covered all their sin*. So God is the God who forgives and is the one whose salvation "is at hand". The final verse of the psalm *Righteousness will go before him, and tread the path before his feet*: this is why the text has been chosen to be read alongside the ministry of John the Baptist (Mark 1:3) whose job is to "prepare (literally *construct*) the way of the Lord and make his paths straight". It emphasises something that we are to understand from within the gospel text itself: God's salvation is at hand, but the salvation that comes in Jesus is far more than would ever have been dreamed about by the exiles. It is none other than God's presence on earth. In the psalm, the notion that God will walk the earth is entirely poetical, and would have been understood clearly in that metaphorical way. The gospel opening tells us that in Jesus, this happens – literally! Likewise, the beautiful poetry of Psalm 85: 10, where *Mercy and truth are met together : righteousness and peace have kissed each other*, is to be understood in a new way in Jesus. In the past, I've actually used this verse as my text for my Christmas sermon.

Now for all of us, I'm sure, it is difficult to hear Isaiah 40: 1-11 without hearing Handel's *Messiah*! The startling, plaintive and yet powerful beauty of the setting for v11 *He shall feed his flock like a shepherd*, in that glorious piece of music evokes precisely the yearning and helplessness of the promise of God the Shepherd. The whole passage in Isaiah tells us: things are as bad as they could be, but God, who is faithful, compassionate and forgiving, is about to act, so wait expectantly! The long-awaited Shepherd is about to appear for the gathering in of the lambs!

These are texts of heightened expectations. God is in the wings. Salvation is about to "appear" on the stage. What has, until now, been a distant hope and promise has drawn excruciatingly, tantalisingly near. The waiting time is *almost* over. If this was a television drama, like *Downton Abbey*, it would be like the point where the episode ends; the credits roll, and the audience is left frustrated and thrilled. "Oh no! How are we going to survive until next week to see what happens?"

The third text that the lectionary gives us is from 2 Peter 3. This is, of course, a text wrestling with the delayed second coming, but by linking it here with the imminent appearance of Jesus it becomes an Advent text. Jesus is coming, and his life and death will disclose the truth of all things. It is the culmination of everything that has gone before. It is not only the climax of the past, but its end, and the ushering in of a new age. This text moves us from expecting the arrival of Jesus *only* as the culmination of the past, to the recognition that it is also something of a radically new and different order.

As we read John's beautiful Prologue to his Gospel we see it as an overture, rehearsing the themes of his gospel. Mark's prologue, today's Gospel reading functions in much the same way, if we read it carefully. Let's look at the elements:

The word we translate as "gospel", or "good news" appears here as something new. Mark announces the Good News of Jesus and in doing so actually creates a new literary genre! There wasn't, in Jewish sacred literature, a category called "gospel". But "good news" was commonly used in Roman society to characterise the doings of the emperor, who was the divine son of the pagan gods. So the birth of Caesar Augustus had been announced as "good

news". But in this Roman context, the word is always found in its plural form. Mark uses the singular. In other words, he is saying, "This is **the** Good News! And it is about Jesus, the Son of God, not some emperor who styles himself divine!" Remember, Mark was writing in a situation of Roman occupation and persecution, in which rebellion was a political crime that carries the death sentence. Jesus is finally crucified as a political agitator. This, then, is a bold proclamation that is deeply subversive: the Good News *is* about a divine figure – but not the emperor! It is a subversive political statement. It is about Jesus, who is coming to overthrow the powers. Caesar will be shown for what he is: a pretender to the divine throne. It is the Kingdom proclaimed and brought near by Jesus, that Kingdom will prevail, not Caesar's!"

In verse 2 Mark refers to *The way* (v2). If we look at a printed version of the Mark's text, it looks like Mark is quoting from Isaiah 40:3, but in fact it is a freely-constructed composite of the Septuagint version of Isaiah 40:3, Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1. Let me read them to you so you can see how Mark does this composite editing: Isaiah 40:3 *A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* Exodus 23:20 *I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on **the way** and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.* Malachi 3:1 *See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.* So this give us in Mark 1:2-3 *'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare **the way** of the Lord, make his paths straight" '*

Now, this makes Mark's composition deliberately subversive. The Exodus text speaks of a way being prepared for the Hebrew people's journey of **liberation**. The situation of the people of Jesus' time was compared to the slavery in Egypt. Mark then identifies "**the way**" with that announced for God's advent by the prophet Malachi. The stress on "**the way**" is not coincidental. "The Way" is a central motif – the way of discipleship of Jesus. The earliest Christians were often called followers of "The Way". The time of Jesus' appearance was a time of intense political speculation and activity. There were many competing "ways" of confronting the power of Rome. Jesus' "Way of the Kingdom" is something *more* than just political confrontation with the powers.

In v3 Mark uses the words *The wilderness*. If Mark had completed the oracle from Malachi 3 it would show that the coming of God is to Jerusalem and the temple, but Mark opts at this point to use Isaiah 40:3, which has the voice *in the wilderness* (the place of John the Baptist's appearance which he presents immediately afterwards in v4). The wilderness is a significant place. It is the place of desolation, where people hunger and have to survive on locusts and wild honey. It is the place of a community in flight and liberation. It is a refuge for the persecuted who await God's deliverance. It is the place where God is to be met, where the prophets come from and speak, and, significantly, the place where rebellion is plotted. There is, again, the hard political edge of resistance, which is part of the significance of Jesus. But also, it is the place where God is doing this last, great, wonderful thing – and it is *not* in Jerusalem, *not* in the temple! In other words, Mark is telling us, the way of Jesus is *on the margins* and in conflict with both the political and religious powers of the day. To be Messiah is to be at a distance from the current political and religious overtones and expectations of that term. Jesus, in other words, will *not* be as they expect him! Mark announces Jesus as Messiah, but his messiahship will be so unexpected that Jesus resists the title during his ministry. The traditional relationship between the messiah and Jerusalem will be redefined by conflict; in the deadly conflict between Jesus and the religious and political powers of his day that ends in death on a Roman cross.

The promised messiah – but one who totally confounds expectations. The Messiah who has come to confront the powers of the day and rob Satan of his prey. This is the one announced by the Voice. It is in the very next verse that the Voice is identified as John the Baptist. Have you noticed, though, that Mark pays extraordinary attention to John's dress and eating habits? This isn't merely to emphasise that John is not the sort of person you hope your daughter brings home to meet the parents! Mark's point is to recast John as Elijah, as promised in the very last verses of the Old Testament *Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.* (*Malachi 4: 5-6*).

In so doing, Mark emphasises not only the importance of John's ministry, and not only the fact that Jesus' coming is indeed the Day of the Lord, but that John represents the *closure* of the old, and Jesus the radically *new*. However much continuity there may be between Jesus and John, the point we are supposed to grasp, says Mark, is that Jesus is of a different order. John is the last of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus is far, far greater.

So the Advent message is to wait with eager, breathless anticipation, but also "prepare to be gob-smacked!" Whatever you might have expected, or be able to imagine, the coming of God in Jesus will be far, far greater and

marvellous! You stand not only on the threshold of a new dawn: you are standing at the very beginning of a New Way. It is a road that will bring conflict, pain, struggle, disillusionment and death. But it is also *the* way to Life, because it is the way of liberation and restoration. The One promised by the prophets **is** coming. But he is also the One far, far greater than any prophet. This is Jesus Messiah, the Son of God.

Using many ideas from <http://disclosingnewworlds.net/advent-2b/> by Lawrence Moore