

Easter Sunday Message

Mark 16:8

When we were children, we all read fairy stories: the tales of Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm or rather less exalted fare. And you will know as well as I do that nine out of ten of these stories end in much the same way: "So the handsome Prince married the beautiful Princess, they had lots of children and they all lived happily ever after". All the trials and tribulations in the story have been overcome, any difficulties have been surmounted, any dragons summarily despatched. Now it's simply sunshine and happiness all the way.

Christians are sometimes prone to make the same mistake. They come to the story of Easter - no fairy tale, of course, but one which asks to be taken at literal, face value - they look at the events of Easter Day and they say, "Great; Christ is risen, the disciples have come to faith, the Church is about to be established. All doubts have been dispelled, all problems have been sorted out, the Christian community can now move forward in resurrection confidence to bring Christ's glory to the world.

In theory, that sounds great. For we are Easter people, we do believe in Christ's resurrection, it is the greatest day in the entire Christian family. But we also know that to speak like that is childish. Amidst the worship, even euphoria, of Easter Day we know that we still have to live in the real world (largely hostile or, at best, uninterested in our message), we have to overcome our very real weaknesses and failures of belief. It would be lovely to close the Bible on Easter Sunday evening and say, "Well, everything went swimmingly from then on"; but we can't do that. We need a grown-up faith which recognises the complexities of human existence, and the difficulty of faith in a sceptical age.

The Gospel of Mark does not give us any promise of easy faith and confident certainty. Indeed its ending, the utterly crucial chapter about Christ's resurrection, is in doubt, with at least three different editorial options on offer; the version we have in our Bibles today is an attempt to amalgamate all the possibilities. Probably the most authentic conclusion to the Gospel is the shortest one, which finishes at verse 8 of chapter 16. The rest of the chapter is almost certainly not original, although it is certainly a correct passing-on of tradition from other sources and a true understanding of what the early Church believed.

And this shortest ending to Mark ends in a very equivocal way. It tells us of the angelic figure announcing Jesus' resurrection to the women who came to visit the tomb on Easter morning. But it concludes with those same two women running away from the tomb in fear. The last word in many English translations is "afraid"; and, in the original Greek, the final sentence actually ends with a preposition meaning "for" or "because" (which is what we were taught not to do in school!) So this is hardly the climactic statement of triumphant faith that we might hope to encounter. Mark's Gospel does not end with a "Yes!" but with a resounding "Well - perhaps"!

Let's think a moment about these three women who fled in fear. That hardly seems to be the emotion we normally associate with Easter morning. So why did they react in such a negative way to the news that Christ had risen? Well, let us try and put ourselves in their shoes. Their Lord and Master had been killed two days earlier, crushed by the combined power of Rome and the Jewish establishment. Quite apart from their ordinary human grief, they are devastated by the fact that someone they trusted has failed to carry out his mission. They are also quite probably worried that they have been linked to this man. Who knows if the authorities will come knocking at their doors?

And then, on Easter morning itself, they are presented with hugely confusing and disconcerting happenings. Having located the tomb (or have they? Are they quite sure they have come to the right place? Perhaps this isn't the right grave, perhaps it was that one over there) they find that the heavy

stone has been moved aside. Who might have done that? What does it mean? Has the grave been violated by enemies or robbers? Has the body been stolen? - and, if so, who's got it and what have they done with it? What might those wicked Romans have been up to? You can just imagine their fearful whispering to each other.

Then, to cap it all, as the women nervously look into the tomb, they see a young man calmly sitting there (the cheek of it!) - an angel, they presume, and everyone knows that meeting an angel is a harbinger of imminent death. Finally the angel speaks, and the message he gives them is barely credible: "I know who you're looking for - it's Jesus. But he's not here, he's risen, he has gone!" Well, that's the last straw, they just don't know what's happening, they've hit sensory meltdown and emotional overload, it's all too much to cope with. No wonder the women fled. If I'd been there, I would have been tempted to run away with them.

Well, those may have been the basic, instinctive reasons why these women were so frightened. But I suspect there may have been a couple of deeper, less tangible issues involved as well.

One fear may simply have been realising that, if Jesus really had risen, then they would have to carry on as his disciples, there could be no easy let-out or excuse for them to go back to their old life. You might well want to ask, "But surely they wouldn't want to stop following Jesus, anyway?" Well, no, they wouldn't - not if he had now proved to be more than prophet and preacher, the Lord of life itself. But, on the other hand, the events of Easter weekend had raised the stakes dramatically. To be a follower of Christ no longer meant that you were following a small-time country Rabbi. Now you were taking on the full weight of Rome, allied to the powerful Jewish political system - and that was scary. You might well think twice about continuing to follow Jesus.

But I think the women's biggest fear was of being caught up in something which they simply could not understand nor control. The author C.P. Snow in his novel "The New Men", which describes the development of the atomic bomb back in the 1940s, talks of the scientists and politicians being caught up in "events greater than men". I think this is the experience these women had: they simply do not know what is going on or where God might be taking them. Suddenly they are confronted by the God's sheer power and the utter unpredictability; he has started acting in ways they had never foreseen. They had thought they had God well tamed; but now he's burst right out of his cage.

Many Christians tend to forget that. We know the facts of our faith very well, we can reel off texts and Bible stories, we may even be a dab hand at theology. And that is fine: provided that we don't end up by trapping God in a mental cage or spider's web from which he cannot escape. Our danger is that we start saying, "Yes, this is the way God works" or "No, God couldn't possibly be in that"; most of the time we might well be right but there will be crucial occasions when that kind of statement is utterly wrong, when God behaves in ways we do not anticipate.

After all, one of the main reasons why the Jews of Jesus' day failed to acclaim him as Messiah (or, while rightly recognising him, completely misunderstood his mission) was because they thought they understood all there was to know about God. How wrong they were! In fact it was their unwillingness to recognise that God was doing something entirely beyond their expectations that made them send Jesus to the Cross, with the result that genuine lovers of God ended up trying to kill him - without even realising it. Fortunately, their success was only temporary, for not even physical death could keep the Son of God down.

And so, if Easter shows us that God cannot be bound by the ways in which we understand him, if Easter demonstrates that God may be dramatically active in ways we had never imagined, what are the implications for our faith? It seems trite and obvious to say, "Be open to the Easter God leading you in new ways in your life", although that is true. It also seems somewhat banal to say, "Allow the Easter God to change the way we live and worship together as his Church" - although we must always be wary of getting too comfortable and set in our habits; the living God will always unsettle us and annoyingly peck at our inflexible and limited ideas.

But God wants to do more than that. He wants to break out into the world in resurrection life. He wants to challenge injustices and inequalities, he wants to overthrow established power structures and hierarchies, he wants to bring weakness where there is arrogant dominance and give life and hope where vulnerable people grovel and keep silent. Easter is not just about personal piety and individual Christian hope: it is also about excited and enthused Christians going into God's world and changing things, optimistically taking part in the great work of bringing God's eternal kingdom into earthly reality.

Yes, we may well have doubts and fears about the Easter story. But I hope that those doubts are not ones which say, "Did it really happen? I'm really not convinced" - although I appreciate that those questions are very real for some people. No; I hope the doubts which the Easter story raises make us say, "I do believe; but what God did was so huge, so new, so amazing, so breathtaking that I'm not quite able to take in what it all means".

As Christians, we will never have all the answers, for faith by its nature cannot always provide certainty. As human beings, we will never be able to completely comprehend God, for his divinity is beyond our finite understanding. But let us embrace the Easter story with as much confidence as we can muster. Let us take from it all the hope and life which it offers us. And then let's surprise the world by doing great things, exciting things, new things in the name of our living Lord.