

'Sounds Greek to you? What a good beginning!'

Sermon for Advent 2 by Mark Pilgrim (Mark 1.1 and 16.8)

At last Tuesday night's Advent Art session Neil Thorogood was encouraging participants to see all the analysis of the two pictures we were looking at as the beginning of a conversation – not as definitive last words. As he said this, he remembered a quote from the famous contemporary Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei which runs: 'Art is not an end but a beginning'.

That what we do is a start rather than a finished product is good to remember. If this is true of a work of art, it is also true of literature and, for the purposes of this sermon, particularly of Mark's Gospel.

What do you know about Mark's Gospel? That it's the shortest one? That it's the one Matthew and Luke take a lot of their material from? That it's the one where Jesus rushes about like a roaring lion, doing everything 'immediately'? Well, here's my invitation for this morning. Think of Mark's Gospel as intended by its author to enable every reader to develop their discipleship of Christ. It's like a battery or fuel cell – designed to provide fuel for the Christian journey to which we can return again and again, from which we need to glide away and put to the test the learning about God's presence in Christ the gospel teaches.

One theologian I was reading recently offers a fascinating insight into the beginning of Mark's Gospel that is our text for consideration this morning. If I sound like I'm speaking Greek to you in a few moments – don't worry: it's because I am...speaking Greek. The first five words of Mark's Gospel are: *arche tou evangeliou Iesou Christou*. Literally this is: (the) 'beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ'. Many commentaries jump straight to the third word 'evangeliou' – an interesting, technical word that we translate as 'good news' or 'gospel'. But David Lose, the theologian I was reading recommends paying deep attention to that very first word 'arche' / beginning'. Why?

Well, for starters, two other hugely important books in the Bible start in an interestingly similar way. Both Genesis and John start their books with 'In the beginning'...'*en arche*'. John's gospel is surely inviting readers to be put in mind of Genesis: just as God was doing something new and revolutionary at the world's Creation, so, John is saying, God did something equally new and creative by taking flesh in the person of Jesus. John copies Genesis and seeks to emphasise the revolutionary creativity of God by using the same '*en arche*'...'in the beginning'. By using '*arche*' at the very first word of his Gospel, perhaps Mark is seeking to ring the same bell in his own way. But perhaps there's another reason too.

Having noted the beginning of this Gospel, let's turn to its end. The vast majority of scholars reckon the original book, having described Jesus' resurrection, ends with this dark and surprisingly negative ending 'the disciples fled from the tomb, terrified and amazed. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid'... dot dot dot. Why end a Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ – on such an unresolved and negative way? It's the kind of ending you find all the time in soap operas like Eastenders and Coronation Street. The audience is deliberately encouraged to ask 'what on earth is going to happen next?' Well, most scholars agree this was exactly Mark's intention. The whole book was conceived as a primer for Christian discipleship. You read it. Then you put it down and live it. Then you come back to it for nourishment and support. Then you put it down again and live it some more. And, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, Mark teaches this from the off. His book opens with the word '*Arche* – Beginning'. This is the beginning of our journey with God, Creator of the world, in Christ. When we get to the end of the book, Mark gets us to ask the question 'What happens next?' And his implicit answer is 'It's over to you...and you...and you!'

That this gospel ends in such a bleak, challenging way is surely appropriate for the Covid times we are living in now. Fear and anxiety are emotions people around the planet are experiencing on a near daily basis. Christian faith, in my experience at least, does not provide a 'get out of jail free' exemption from this. But Mark's Good News Gospel wants to say 'Remember: God's work isn't done. It's over to you...and you...and you...to work in tandem with God's Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Christ which is still at work around, below, above and within us.'

And, in the same way that God's presence and activity in Christ is portrayed as happening in the quiet, unglamorous backwater of Galilee in northern Israel, so Mark's gospel invites us to see God's presence and activity happening in the quiet unglamorous corners of our world...here in Henleaze and its environs in north west Bristol.

Jesus' ongoing work is to be seen in every gesture of discipleship we make. Think of St Peter's Values. Jesus' ongoing work might be evident whenever we Pray faithfully, Listen well, Act boldly and Serve generously. And when I review the last seven days, I am confident that St Peter's attenders are doing all these things. I just have to think of the 60 minute prayer session some shared in on Wednesday afternoon. I just have to think of the listening to health issues and difficult news that has criss-crossed our phone lines. I just have to think of the bold action involved in raising 50% more money for our Treasure Sunday appeal than was originally asked for. And, for generous service, I just have to think of the flood of offers to deliver 2500 Christmas cards to every house in the parish – all offered and carried out within days of the opportunity arising. And that's just the examples of discipleship, of the Risen Christ's activity continuing, that I can think of. You will be aware of other examples, I am sure.

Ai Weiwei's comment that art is not an end but a beginning encourages me to end by highlighting another part of our interesting, Covid-affected Christmas programme. Going up in church soon will be our Christmas Story Painting Trail. Hanging between the pillars in church you will see large copies of 12 paintings – 6 classical paintings and 6 more modern takes. Each portrays one of 6 scenes from the Christmas story: the Annunciation, an angel visiting Joseph while he slept, the journey to Bethlehem, the Shepherds in the fields and at the manger and the visit of the Magi. The final painting of the Magi is by Hi Qi, another Chinese artist who is a committed Christian and paints biblical scenes employing Chinese influenced imagery. I encourage, indeed, urge you to come and view the paintings and see what reflections on God's activity in Christ they spark in you. My prayer is that reflecting on these pieces of art will not be an end in itself but the beginning of still deeper relationship between yourself and God. As Mark's Gospel says...throughout the pages of the book: reading the gospel is the *Arche*, a beginning, a jumping off point for our journey with God. The question I pose now is: 'How are we going to continue the story? How are we 'St Peter's people' going to write the next chapter of the story together? How is each one of us going to build God's kingdom, in the power of the Spirit, a little bit more during the darkened but hope-filled days of this Christmas season and beyond?

Let's pray: Gracious God, we thank you for Mark's Gospel and the way it can act as a springboard for us to dive deeper into Christian faith. May reading and reflecting on the bible always open up new beginnings for our appreciation of your love, glory and mercy. Work through us that those with whom we share our lives may see you are very much at work in your world today. Amen.