

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : December 6th, 2020
“Second Sunday of Advent”

ADVENT 2, 2020

‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’. Thus Mark begins his gospel, which is the lead Gospel for this year, an account written with his typical direct style and sense of immediacy – and, well, almost in a hurry, at a fast pace.

Written after the epistles and letters, his gospel, the first of the four to be written, was needed as an authentic record of Jesus. The new church was under threat and so this gospel is indeed a gospel written in a hurry. It’s a story rather than a letter and can easily read in a couple of hours. Years ago, I saw the actor Alec McCowan read – or perhaps perform? – the Gospel. Thrilling. It’s a single text which was to be heard. That’s why it is good for people who are new to faith. I read it recently in a version with no division of chapters or verses – which I understand was how it was first penned. Try it sometime. It’s a gripping account which you won’t be able to put down.

‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’. One of things you will notice with Mark is that he likes detail. It’s delightful to know, for example, about the details of John’s revolting diet, which would not be out of place in ITV’s ‘I’m a Celebrity, get me out of here’! In chapter 4 with the stilling of the storm we learn that Jesus was asleep in the boat on a cushion. Then in chapter 6 the feeding of the 5,000 took place with everyone sitting where there was green grass. These are all very powerful details which draw us into the story.

And one final introductory thing about Mark – the ending of his Gospel. It stops suddenly and abruptly at verse 8 of chapter 16, which reads: “the disciples and the

women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” ‘And’ we shout: ‘What then’? Had the last page of the manuscript been lost? Scholars have agonised over what this means, why it finishes as it does. Some include the last endings – there’s a short ending and a longer ending – but neither of these are in the same Markan style and were almost certainly additions by another writer. They are not satisfactory. And then a marvellous possibility dawns on us – that we are the end of the story. That the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God is now continuing through us – and that was what Mark meant to do. That may or may not be true but it’s the explanation I like the most. For that is indeed Good News. ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’.

For us today is the beginning of being back in church. It is good to be back in church. That is Good News. Yes, I know we still can’t sing and we have to wear face coverings. But we are back where we belong, along with those who have joined us online. Together, wherever we are, we are the Body of Christ. And maybe, just maybe, this is enough for now. Yes, of course we miss the opportunity to greet each other warmly at the Peace. Yes, of course we miss the opportunity to freely chat together. Above all perhaps we miss being able to sing.

Music is always a wonderful addition to our worship for the story of the birth of Jesus was accompanied, we are told in the other Gospels, by a choir of heavenly, angelic voices, such as we have here sitting here in the choir stalls. Yet despite all that we are missing and more, maybe deep down we know that it is by our simple said Communion together – whether you are here in church or taking part at home – that this is the closest we will get in quietness and simplicity to worshipping the Christ-child, as did those shepherds and wise men in that tiny, messy stable in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago. And that is indeed Good News for us all today. Amen.