

## SERMON 7 JANUARY 2018

Welcome back to Mark's Gospel. In some ways it seems as though we have taken a big leap from being immersed in Luke's account of Christmas with all its mystery, wonder and hard reality. Today the lectionary writers have seen fit to take us right back to the very beginning of God's story with humankind with the beautiful imagery of the Creation of the earth itself. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..". Into that formlessness, God brought light, separating light and darkness. That creative power of God was emphasized in the words of the Psalm we heard: "The voice of God is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic" with all the examples of that the Psalmist describes.

Then we come, apparently suddenly, to the baptism of Jesus. We should really have read from verse one, because it echoes Genesis' "In the beginning". Mark begins, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah". This is another new beginning. It is a new beginning embedded in God's story as it has been from the inception of the universe. Whether we try to imagine how that was, with some cataclysmic Big Bang, or whether we understand it through the poetry of Genesis, the person of Jesus is not some sudden appearance, come as if on some whim of the Creator, but is woven into the whole story of God's relationship with us and with all God's creatures.

So, as we read the words of Genesis and of the Psalms that speak of Creation, as we sing hymns that seek to express what we all glimpse of the wonder and power of creation that goes on, continually, all around us, we are being shown a story of God's power. That power is truly awesome, fearful and majestic. In these times we may watch in horror, from the comfort of our living-rooms, eruptions, fires, floods and earthquakes that devastate lives around the world. There is no escaping this. Some may choose to see these as an "Act of God", things that insurance companies won't deal with. Others may see how these events have always been part of the ongoing force of the earth's own energies of constant change, change that is both destructive and renewing.

It is no accident that the lectionary gives us these readings as it brings us to Mark and his account of the good news of Jesus. Mark introduces the story of Jesus through John the Baptist, the prophetic figure. We are pointed back to Isaiah has spoken of this person as the one who would prepare the way for the Lord. As Mark describes it, it is as though people needed to be shaken out of their routines and lack of expectation, their ways of life that were not life-giving and that had, apparently, drifted from the way of God. This had been the role of prophets down

the ages. Mark tells us how John has appeared in the wilderness, clad in camel hair, existing on locusts and wild honey, preaching repentance – the turning back to God – and baptising those who took his message to heart, so they might be ready. He understood that God energy was about change, and God was going to do something.

Into the picture steps Jesus. Now Mark writes his gospel without much embellishment; he merely says, “At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan.” That is such a contrast to the way in which Luke introduces Jesus. From the beginning, Mark’s Jesus knows that he is God’s son, because, after his baptism, Mark says “a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” It is not clear that anyone else heard this, but Jesus did. This is the beginning of the Jesus story. This was the first gospel to be written and so was the first to be read to those who had come to hear more about what the first apostles taught. This is the beginning of our journey with Mark through this liturgical year.

But I have left out a verse in this telling. It is a verse that I found particularly striking in the context in which, as we have been hearing, the lectionary has set this, the passages about the creation. It is the verse that reads: “Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.”

I had never really paused at this before, but it brought me up short this year. What an image! Heaven being torn open. That is not a gentle act. It seems to indicate that an invisible, impenetrable barrier between earth and heaven, between the physical and the spiritual, is ripped apart. What happens? We might have imagined bolts of lightning, shedding blinding light from above; but it’s not like that, even though Mark, near his conclusion, reports on the darkness that descended on the earth again in an act, almost, of un-creation, as Jesus’ life comes to an end. No, at this beginning, what happens is that the Holy Spirit descends on him gently, like a dove. Heaven is torn open and a dove appears!

What might this say to us about this person, this Son of God? What might it say to us of the ministry on which Jesus will embark? This image holds in tension both the almighty power of creation and the nature of this extraordinary and surprising power that Jesus will show: the power of God’s peace and love. It surely indicates to us that God’s love is not a soft thing, able to be beaten down in a storm or brushed off in angry power-plays. This power of God’s love is part of that ongoing re-creative work of the Holy Spirit that the dove represents for us. It was a dove that Noah sent

out from the ark, after the raven. The first time the dove flew, there was nowhere for it to rest and it returned to Noah's outstretched arm. After 7 more days he sent the dove out again and this time it returned with an olive branch in its beak. So, the dove has become for people a symbol of peace, of reconciliation and of God's new beginning. Here, in Mark, the dove descends from heaven to earth, to Jesus, as the new beginning of God's relationship with people is made possible.

This is a relationship based on the power of God's love. The difficulty is that we do not readily accept the nature of the relationship God would offer us. So often that power of love is moulded and re-fashioned by humankind's own need for control. Too often it becomes a power of fear, of obedience based on rules and regulations, not a power of love based on God's grace and healing embrace. This God-love is a love that would hold everything as sacred, as being made, as Genesis tells us, in the image of God. This love-power of the Holy Spirit is ceaselessly at work.

Mark always displays an urgency to what happens. We only get to verse 17 of this first chapter before we find that Jesus is calling his first disciples to follow him. What power of love does that indicate! And what power of love is it that keeps on calling to us! It has to, because this is God's purpose. Jesus' ministry needs his followers. It always has and it always will. As is often said, "God has no hands but our hands".

The danger of talking about the power of love is that it becomes sentimentalised. Discipleship is not a soft option. Talking of love also leaves us questioning how it/we can respond to so much that is the antithesis of love: all the violence, abuse, racism, sin of so many kinds that can seem overwhelming.

Richard Rohr, whom you have heard me quote several times, frequently emphasizes how we have so misunderstood the love of God and its transformative power. But he also doesn't avoid the hard questions. I quote from something he posted last week:

"You may be asking, as so many have over the years, "Richard, how can you make such naïve blanket statements like 'Everything is sacred. Everything belongs?' What about Hitler, nuclear bombings, ISIS, Westboro Baptists, and the United States' epidemic of mass shooters?" I agree that we can and should name evil as evil. But unless we first name the underlying goodness and coherence of reality, along with our own imperfection, we will attack evil with methods and self-righteousness that will only deepen the problem. This is Nonviolence 101. It wasn't until the twentieth century that the importance of nonviolence became widely acknowledged.

Further, Christianity has far too easily called individual, private behaviours sins while usually ignoring or even supporting structural and systemic evils such as war,

colonization, corporate greed, slavery, and abuse of the Earth. All of the seven capital sins were admired at the corporate level and shamed at the individual level. This left us utterly split in our morality, dealing with symptoms instead of causes, shaming people while glorifying systems that were themselves selfish, greedy, lustful, ambitious, lazy, prideful, and deceitful. We can't have it both ways. Evil lurks powerfully in the shadows, in our unconscious complicity with systems that serve us at others' expense. It has created worldviews of entitlement and privilege that were largely unrecognized until rather recently.'

He goes on to indicate that it is only when we clear away our illusions, when we open our hearts to what we know is right and good and true, that we can see beyond the webs of darkness and recognise the hand of God at work in creation and see the power of love that call us to take part. That is what Jesus came to show us: the way that is never overcome by all the forces of hatred, evil, violence, political power or anything else.

We have celebrated Christmas and the wonder of the incarnation of God's love, God-with-us. The beauty of the season drew us in and made it easier to accept. Now, as we set out with Mark, we are led straight onto the pathway of walking the challenging way of love. So let us remember its power, immersed in and throughout creation, and trust in that ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Let us remember how heaven was torn open and that it was a dove that descended to mark this new beginning.