

Until the last twelve months it might have been easy for us to take our freedom to worship for granted. But after a year of hardly worshipping physically together it has been so powerful to journey through the stories of Jesus last days with you during the past week. Though to be honest at times it has been hard to remember the patterns we have once used – but maybe that is not a bad thing!

The Easter story may feel familiar to us, but it is not just a story from the past – it is the essence of who we are – it is the living proof that God is with us, forming and shaping us. Having said this, often we forget parts of the story, or remember it differently. This is often to the experience of reading different Gospel accounts – all of which look at the events in slightly different ways.

This year, we hear the story of the resurrection from Mark's Gospel. Now while for Mark most of the events and characters are similar to that of the other Gospels - All of them place this story at the tomb; the time is early in the morning on the day after the Sabbath; and Mary Magdalene shows up in all the accounts. But what is sometimes unsettling in Mark's account is that Jesus doesn't appear. Rather to see Jesus the disciples and those who want to witness the resurrection have to travel out into the border regions. Philip Ruge- Jones puts it this way to see Jesus in Mark's Gospel *'you have to go back to Galilee where he promises to meet us. Going back to Galilee means going back to the margins where Jesus ministered and encountering him again feeding the hungry, driving out the demons that torment people, preaching words of hope to the broken-hearted, healing those in distress, and breaking down the barrier walls that separate people'*¹.

I think in many ways Mark's account, because it leaves us wanting more, challenges its readers (us) to not only go out into the margins to find Jesus; but also have the courage to meet Jesus in new and fresh ways – every time we hear the story.

It challenges us to not just think we know the story, but to actually read it and realise how amazing it is – no matter how familiar it is. This past year in many ways has been a gift to the way we practice our faith because we have had to think about it. We couldn't just simply turn up to prayers, or a service, or even just come and sit in church. We have been challenged by new ways of worship – and hopefully to hear the stories of our faith in new ways.

Easter is a time when we all renew our faith, when we affirm that we are believers. We can just answer the questions of statement of fact – because we do believe. But I was challenged yesterday to remember that answering these questions is not just about fact; but they are of course statements of faith which engage not only mind, but our soul and spirit. They are emotive statements which call us to take risks. For us in central London these may not feel like risky statements – but Mark is right we

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3611

are not called to a faith which keeps us kneeling and praying in the garden at the empty tomb. We are called to a faith which sends us out to the margins to bring change to the world.

The other challenge of Mark's account is the last sentence, the women did not do as the angel says rather '*fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid*²' I suspect for each of us there is an element of the women's behaviour; times when the story of Easter, or even the responsibility of our faith fills us with fear and so we do not tell anyone. I often speak with people who have encountered God in a vision or a dream; or even when reading the bible; but they have not felt confident or safe enough to share their experience with anyone – even others in the same faith community.

Let us not be too hard on the women in this story, because it takes a great deal of courage to share experiences of faith with others. Even here in church, where you would hope we have similar aspirations in faith, we are often fearful of sharing stories of our faith with others. Sometimes this is because we are shy, or feel overwhelmed – but often I think it is like the women in the garden – we think people will think we are crazy!

I have shared with some of you before that for a long period in my life I refused to tell people that I was a Christian – I thought they would think I was mad – or boring – or weird (actually I was weird so that wasn't really a surprise). But I know also that fear came from the fact that I knew many of friends thought they knew what a Christian was – but actually it was based on a stereotype which didn't relate to the kind of faith I – or most of us have. I feared that they wouldn't listen to what I had experienced and why I believed. This was even more profound when I became a Priest, it becomes a little harder to deny you are a Christian at that point!

I have realised though that in behaving this way I undervalued the friends I had, because I didn't trust I could tell them; but also I sold myself short because I didn't trust that God knew what God was doing!

Mark's Gospel account reminds us of the courage that each of us needs to have as we live out our faith, not only on the margins but here to at St Anne's. It reminds us that we need to be open to hearing about the experiences that each of us have, the struggles we encounter as we read the scriptures together or as we pray for each other the world.

Easter is a time which reminds us of the story and purpose of our faith, but it is also a time which reminds us of who we are too! And I hope that as a community we will continue to grow in confidence in sharing our experiences with each other.

² Mark 16:8

We are going to continue to face many challenges in the months and years ahead – not just because of the pandemic and its consequences; but because as a community we will have many serious questions facing us.

The challenge of the ending of Mark's Gospel is one that calls us to be a community of Justice – one that is not fearful to speak out on issues that need to be named; to call for equality and inclusion; and not be silent even if speaking fills us with anxiety.

The challenge of the resurrection is an invitation to each of us, that may we have the courage like those first followers to go and tell; and to continue to share with each other the joy of our faith – today and forevermore.

Happy Easter!