

Sunday Sermon Notes – Mark, Evangelist and Martyr – 26th April 2020

From Rev'd Jilleen Chambers

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

From Easter until Pentecost, which this year is on Sunday 31st May, we commence our services with the wonderful exclamation:

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

We are still inhabiting this strange land of self-isolation. And some of us may be feeling a bit like we are stuck in a time warp. A few times I have had to check my phone to be reminded of the day and date. There may be feelings of being in exile from our ordinary lives or trapped in the valley of dry bones (see Ezekiel 37: 1-14) waiting for the new life of resurrection to come.

The wonder of Easter is that resurrection and renewal does happen and often in ways we may not expect. We have time for longer phone calls with family and friends; some have had to use new technology to connect to others using zoom or facetime; time to finish that book; and even time to sit and reflect and pray – something we may not ordinarily take the time for in our usual busy lives. So often our prayers are like a grocery list of needs that we present before God. Amen. It is when we take the time to stop and pray with our hearts open to God, when we have a conversation with God about our deepest heartfelt needs and desires (when we are truly honest with God), that we start to allow God to speak into our lives. It is life changing. Resurrection happens!

You may have noticed that this Sunday we honour the author of the Gospel of Mark as an Evangelist and Martyr. Though, as with many of the saints of the early church, the actual identity of the author of the Gospel of Mark is lost in the mists of time. He is also credited with founding the church in Alexandria in Egypt and killed by people who opposed Christianity. If you are interested, do a search for Mark the Evangelist in Wikipedia.

Traditionally, it is believed the gospel of Mark was written from the sermons of the Apostle Peter by a young man named Mark who travelled with him. There are a number of interesting aspects about the Gospel of Mark. It is the earliest of the four gospels, it is shorter, and was used as a source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Unfortunately, the documents that have survived appear to have lost the original ending of the gospel as it finishes with the women being afraid and not telling anyone of the angel's message announcing the resurrection of Jesus. Though they must have told someone as we still have their story of encounter with the angel. The action in Mark is fast paced and the picture it gives us of Jesus' disciples does not flatter them at all. They are very human.

It is the very humanity of the disciples that gives us hope. Jesus called twelve very ordinary men from diverse backgrounds as his disciples. People we would not consider to be world shattering prospects. A few were fishermen including the impetuous Peter and James and John who sought places of honour in the kingdom they believed Jesus would establish; there was Matthew the tax collector, Simon the zealot, the sceptic Thomas, and also Judas who would later betray him. Overall, not a promising bunch. Jesus had many other followers including women, beside the twelve. We know he sent out seventy of his followers to carry his message of the coming of the kingdom of God to the surrounding towns.

Notably the gospels do not record that there were any of the scholarly elite of society such as the Scribes or Pharisees among Jesus' disciples. If you wanted to change the world, who would you choose? The brightest scientists – whom people delight to contradict with pseudo-science; people with power – charismatic leaders or politicians who have their own agenda; people with wealth – after all they must know something if they have become wealthy; kings and queens – who don't have

the influence they once did; leaders of churches – again they don't have the authority they once did. Though Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King have had huge and continuing influence in their fight for freedom and racial equality. The world is changed by ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

What was it that so radically changed these very ordinary men and women and empowered them to change the world? The reading from Ephesians chapter 4 verses 7-16 gives us clues. Jesus has given many gifts to the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to equip and build up the body of Christ. (These are five of the gifts though there are many more.)

'The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers' (*Eph 4: 11*)

They were changed through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. These gifts aren't random or given for the recipients' personal benefit or power within the church but for a specific purpose:

'to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.' (*Eph 4: 12-13*)

Contrary to some beliefs, these gifts weren't just for the Apostles or for the time of the early church. They are still given today to establish, grow and enable the body of Christ – the church: apostles – sent to take the message of Jesus to others and form and oversee churches; prophets – speaking the word of God into difficult and changing times and situations; evangelists - challenging people to change their lives and follow Jesus; pastors – calling us together to be the body of Christ; and teachers – to ground us in the faith of Christ and connect the word of God into our everyday lives.

The first disciples/apostles were charged with the faithful transmission of Jesus' teachings and through the centuries, the church has continued to faithfully guard these truths that we find in the gospels. When we are grounded in the teachings of the Jesus, we won't be:

'tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.' (*Ephesians 4: 14-16*)

These gifts guide the church and enable us to become the people God has called us to be and to do works of ministry in Jesus' name (for we are his hands and feet) – caring for each other, reaching out to people in need, telling others about Jesus and praying for our world. And our ministry is not only within the church. It is to our family, neighbours, our community, the people we work with or meet in the various theatres of our lives.

Have you ever thought of your work as being ministry? Just look at the extraordinary people who are keeping the world safe and happening around us. Nurses, doctors, health care and emergency workers, police chemists, bus drivers, shop assistants, teachers, the list could go on. Everything we do to assist and benefit others is ministry – not just what we do in church. It is ministry because we are serving our community and it is Christian ministry when we do it in a way that honours Christ.

I am finishing these Sermon notes on ANZAC Day after watching the service from the Duntroon Chapel in Canberra (it is still available on UTUBE and Facebook). On this day, we are reminded of all the ordinary men and women who have served in our nation's armed forces in times of war and times of supposed peace. It is also a reminder that our freedoms have been hard won. And today we fight another war where our soldiers are doctors and nurses, health care workers and cleaners. Our world is far from being the peaceful place we always hope and pray it will be. But that doesn't mean we give up hopes for peace. Instead it is a call to honour those who have given their all and continue

to serve in the name of freedom for us and for the people of other countries by striving for peace in all areas of life. Our salvation was also hard won through the death of Jesus Christ and it has been witnessed to by the apostles and many, many ordinary people over the past two thousand years.

It is interesting that Jesus chose very flawed individuals to be his followers. But the amazing fact is that these men and women went on to change the world. And he calls us to do the same within our community. Although we live in a secular society, have you ever stopped to consider how our society and the world benefits from the influence of Christian teaching? How it has changed our world, changed how we respect the life of every individual, and our relationships with other people? Resurrection does happen in unexpected places.

Our final hymn today was: *We have a gospel to proclaim*
We have a gospel to proclaim, good news for all throughout the earth;
the gospel of a Saviour's name: we sing his glory, tell his worth.

Tell of his reign at God's right hand, by all creation glorified.
He sends his spirit on his church to live for him, the Lamb who died.

Now we rejoice to name him King: Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel-message we proclaim: we sing his glory, tell his worth.

The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!
Stay safe.
Rev'd Jilleen