

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2016
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Psalm 42; Mark: 14: 3-9, 15: 33-34, 16: 1-8



“God’s Cry”

All four gospels have a distinctly unique way in which they tell the story of Jesus. Each handle the material that has been handed down to them in a different way. Each has its own, unique, and different from the others, way of taking whatever was available to them at the time, and shaping it into a narrative that tells the story of Jesus, and conveys to their readers what they think was important to know and understand about him.

Over the next couple of Sundays, in the weeks leading up to Easter, we will be looking at how every gospel, in its own way, gave shape to the story of Jesus’ passion and resurrection, and the message they are trying to convey telling it.

Today we start with the gospel of Mark. The gospel that is believed to be, by most scholars, the first of the four gospels written. It is often thought to represent an earlier, less developed stage of development in early Christian faith and thought. It seems simpler, more straightforward and cleaner in the way it puts its message across, and it is a lot shorter than the other gospels. It has therefore, by some, over the ages, sometimes been brushed aside as inferior to the other gospels.

I believe, however, that the gospel of Mark is in every way as deep, complex and mature as any of the other gospels. Carefully composed, I believe its simplicity is deceptive, drawing readers in to discover profound riches.

The story it tells is intimate, the tone direct, the story line less cluttered than in some of the other gospels. It takes us as readers from wilderness to wilderness (Mark doesn’t tell a birth story) on a journey where wilderness and death bracket and interrupt the way that leads from Galilee to Jerusalem.

There are several themes and story lines to be discovered in Mark, weaving in and out of each other as Jesus travels, with his disciples from a place of success and glory, to a place of death and desolation. There is the theme of the messianic secret where the mystery of who and what Jesus is surfaces and resurfaces, suggesting there is more than the eye can see, or the heart can understand, to the man Jesus, but never quite going so far as to fully reveal what the low down is. There is the theme of the misunderstanding of who and what he is by his disciples, who, in Mark’s gospel, never seem to completely get what he is on about. It is an open ended story, where the resurrection ends in the open ended suggestion that he is somehow “ahead” of them, and leads everybody back to the beginning, to Galilee, where they will meet him, as well as fearful women who don’t tell anybody anything.

Part of how the intimate feel of the gospel comes about is through the way it portrays Jesus and his band of friends as a household; a family on their way through life. Struggling with each other in much the same way as we or anybody else in human history does. And Jesus, although very much his leader, is portrayed to be struggling with that human frailty and human limitations as much as everybody else. He doesn’t get through to his disciples, let alone to anybody else, and although he is really successful in ministry in the first part of the gospel, in the second part of the gospel he meets with animosity and misunderstanding all round. By the time we get to the passion, it has become abundantly clear already that Jesus is struggling; struggling with those who are part of his household as much as those outside it.

The story of the passion then, in Mark, is very much the story of that household disintegrating.

The story starts with the anointing of Jesus in Bethany. A woman disrupts a dinner party by displaying irrational, emotional and, in the eyes of most of those present, unnecessarily wasteful behaviour. She breaks a whole bottle of very expensive nard oil over Jesus' head, worth a whole year of wages of an ordinary labourer. Preparing this sermon, I wondered if I broke a bottle of nard oil over the altar here at the front of the Church, and told you it was worth \$40,000, what would your response be? What do you think? Would some of you have come up with better ideas to spend that kind of money? We would also probably have had to evacuate the building for the overwhelming smell that would probably have lingered for months.

Excessive, unnecessary and over emotional. Rational, sensible and frugal. And the household disintegrating in between.

Quite apart from who was right and who was wrong, in just a few verses Mark makes it perfectly clear just how deep the rifts already are and how deep the tensions run, even within the household, let alone outside it.

Those of us who struggle with family troubles will know what happens at a table when the gloves are suddenly off and rifts such as this open. Your heart goes cold, and everyone holds their breath, and hopes someone, anyone, will divert the attention of everybody else, usually to try and go on as if nothing has happened.

It's not what Jesus does. He makes things worse. Instead of some conciliatory noises and some "oh guys, come on, be nice to each other now, it's nearly Easter" sort of comments, he sides with the person that, for most, would have been clearly bonkers, and backs her up. With words that cannot possibly have made much sense to anybody at the time.

So what sense does it make?

Anointing was for Kings, at the occasion of their ascendance to the throne. Anointing was for sex, an expression of love that only the ridiculously rich or ridiculously love struck could afford. Anointing was for burial, to honour a loved one who was no more.

Here at the beginning of the passion story, it points us, the readers, more than anybody would ever have been able to grasp at the time, to the ascension of a King, to the union between heaven and earth that would be forged through this King, and to the burial that casts its shadow before.

Jesus may or may not have said what he said to those who were attending the party, but Mark, in this scene, through those words, uses those words to talk to us, to call attention to what is about to happen. The King enthroned, a union forged, a burial pending. Mark calls us, his readers, to attention, by showing us the rift that is opening in Jesus' household at this point. Jesus is cut loose from some of his closest friends because they do not understand him, they do not get it, they are not on the same wavelength. Only a few, regarded by the others as not quite right in the head, are with him.

In two chapters, with his friends on the way to the tomb, we will hear echoes of what happened here reverberating through the story. They wanted to anoint him and now they are alone, cut loose, lost.

From here on, from this moment at the table in Bethany, things go from bad to worse. Betrayal, abandonment, humiliation and loneliness isolate Jesus further and further from everyone around him. Even his best friends don't stay with him. Not when he prays in Gethsemane, not when they watch from a distance as he faces the court, not when he is finally nailed to the cross.

The story as Mark tells it tells us about a suffering, abused, humiliated figure with nobody standing by him.

Reflecting on that part of the story, a video we were shown at the course in Sydney came to mind. It is a video of a man suffering with severe depression who has suffered deeply at the hands of an abusive father and has been unable to move past the trauma he has suffered at the hands of one who should have loved and cared for him. At one stage, he says: The beating was not so bad you know, it was the humiliation, the betrayal, the lies, the abandonment, the loneliness I was made to suffer that are so incredibly hard to heal.

Portrayals of Jesus' suffering, even the sensationalist ones like Mel Gibson's in the suffering of Christ, tend to gloss over that. They focus on the physical pain inflicted, not the mental agony that is, when people suffer like that, much worse.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, cries Mark's Jesus from the cross. A cry that chills to the bone. Because we all know that there is nothing worse. Nothing worse than to be abandoned, betrayed, humiliated, and defeated, finding nothing other than emptiness when we reach out for comfort, for support, for something to hold and keep us.

Even God is gone.

And that's what happens when the human household of God disintegrates. There is nothing and nowhere left for God to be experienced, to be reached out to. Because there is no experience of God where the community has collapsed and our very being has been crushed. God lives in us, we are his image, and in our community and in our faces and hands, God's presence takes shape.

Here at the cross, neither of those remain, there is only a void, an emptiness, where there is nothing left but the cry: why? where? what for? Jesus, the one who lived God's love like no other, has been reduced to nothing, not a shred is left intact. His fellow humans, in whom God sought to be mirrored, have seen to that.

What happens here is unfathomably deep, and devastating. But in it is good news. Especially for those, like the man in the video, who share that experience with Jesus. Of being reduced to nothing through the cruelty of others. Of being isolated, humiliated, betrayed and abused, and crying out into an empty void.

The gospel is not where the story ends. A couple of women find the courage to face what seems immovable. They go to honour this battered soul, even when they don't know how on earth they are ever going to get to him. Their love is the first ray of a tentative hope that not all may be lost. Their mad desire to honour and anoint what was lost and discarded, to mend something that, for all intents and circumstances, is irreparably broken. That's where the resurrection starts in Mark, mirroring that other woman, and the other anointing. Pure madness, total waste of time, money and energy, love seeking to express itself against the tide, and creating something unforgettable.

The stone is rolled away, the grave is empty. There are no stories about encounters with the risen Jesus in Mark, just this, an empty tomb and a young man who tells them he is ahead of them, ready to meet them and re-begin the journey with them, in Galilee.

Is it an angel? Do we dare to think that here, sitting at the head of the emptiness in that grave, there is a reference to the empty place on the ark of God where God's glory, according to the Old Testament lives? Do we dare think that there is more to it than just getting on and moving forward in the emptiness, in the silence, in the aftermath of that experience of the void? That there is more than a cry into nothing where we are confronted with deep, unjustifiable, unnecessary and wanton cruelty. That somehow, in the emptiness, there is hope where people return to love, and dare to believe that love is still travelling ahead of them, no matter what happens and no matter what they may have done or failed to do?

Mark, to me, dares to tell the story of Jesus as one of humiliation and loneliness, of loss and forsakenness, of betrayal and cruelty. He leaves it open ended, ambiguous, paradoxical, with nothing more than emptiness and a couple of scared women to show for it. He reaches out into that void and moves past it, as

the women have done, to find our way and catch up with love, and trust and faith, moving into the future, trying to figure out again, following in Jesus' footsteps, how it's done: Mirroring God and giving shape to his body in the world.

What does that mean? Do I have to spell it out?

Amen.

<http://www.ctc.edu.au/Teaching-Staff/Lecturers/Rev-Dr-Michael-Trainor-AM.aspx>

<https://wipfandstock.com/the-body-of-jesus-and-sexual-abuse.html>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spikenard>