

April 10 2009: Good Friday

‘Darkness at Noon’

Six Addresses for The Three Hours service from 12noon – 3pm

Introduction

This service marks the three hours when, according to the synoptic Gospels, Christ was on the cross. We are at the centre of the Christian faith. We are going to read the account of the Passion in Mark’s Gospel, the greater part of it set to music by John Sanders. Simply being at the cross of Christ is difficult. The disciples forsook him and fled; the women watched from a distance. But by reading the scriptures and allowing them to work on us in the way Mark must have intended, we will hear God speak to us in the depths of this experience. Unquestionably this is tough, and that is barely masked by the context of liturgy or the beauty of this place, but Mark says he is giving us ‘good news’ and that we will find it.

The story is familiar, of course, but the readings are printed in addition to the service sheet. We are so used to harmonising the four Gospels that it becomes very striking when we are faced with any one of them. It will help, I think, to be able to follow the Gospel and go back to it, particularly in the silences.

Stay for as much of the three hours as you can. It is divided into six sections, so if you want to leave, please do so during the hymns that will be sung at roughly 30 minute intervals. That’s when others will join us. Each section has a similar pattern until the last, so for those who stay a rhythm is established for our prayers. There is no collection during the service but at the end the stewards will have baskets if you would like to make an offering to the work of this church.

The end of the service will be outside on the portico, where church and world connect, around the baby in stone and the cross. It is a reminder that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world” and it is to this that we witness to ourselves and to those who pass by.

After the service, hot cross buns will be served in the hall in the crypt. For myself, I know that by then I will want to flee. Three hours at the cross is more than most of the disciples managed in any of the accounts of the Passion and even after a more gentle retelling of the story liturgically, when Jesus has been laid in the tomb we may just want to go away quietly.

Let us pray,

Anointing the Body – Mark 14.1-25

Jesus was a trouble maker, and he had been so from the outset.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the gospel [the good news] of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.’

(Mark 1.15)

He caused division wherever he went by making clear that the ways of God’s kingdom were not the ways of the world. Jesus was a disturber, not a settling sort of figure and his call to repentance, a process of turning round and facing God, is a judgement on this age. So two days before the Passover, the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest him and kill him.

Mark’s is the earliest and the shortest of the four Gospels that made it into the Canon of Christian scripture. Each Gospel tells the stories of Jesus as ‘Good News’ in a way that is shaped by their ending. The two chapters of Mark’s Passion only make sense if we read and hear them with the eyes and ears of Easter. So oddly enough on Good Friday, and in a way I have previously tried to avoid at this service, we’re going to begin at the end because it is the only way to make sense of the journey.

Early on the morning of the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, three women, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, went to the tomb with spices so that they might anoint him.

They could not do so. The tomb was empty, the dead body gone. But here, at the beginning of Mark’s account of the Passion, at the House of Simon the Leper in Bethany, an unnamed woman with an alabaster jar of costly ointment broke open the jar and poured oil on Jesus’s head. It is an event packed with meaning.

Women were the first witnesses to the resurrection and here, at the start of Mark’s account of the Passion, Jesus is anointed by an unnamed woman.

By pouring the oil over his head, she anointed him as messiah or king. It’s easy to get this story mixed up with the one told by Luke (7.36ff) about a woman who was a sinner who bathed Jesus’s feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. She kissed his feet and poured oil on them. That woman was also unnamed. A later tradition assumed the sinner was a prostitute, and connects both stories with Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons were cast (Lk 8.2). Mary Magdalene, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, was one of the three women who went to the tomb to anoint his body with spices early on Easter morning and who become the first witnesses to the resurrection. In John she goes on her own and meets the Lord whom she things to be the gardener. It is unlikely the unnamed women were Mary Magdalene but she was such a central witness to the resurrection and it fits so well with what we know about the company Jesus kept, that the composite woman speaks truth to us.

In Mark’s Gospel Jesus has told the people who recognise him not to say who he is. Now, at the start of the account of the Passion, this woman anoints him as Messiah and reveals him as king with fantastically expensive ointment, which could have been sold for 300 denarii. It is a lavish,

loving gift, almost beyond price; and it becomes the explanation for Judas betraying him. Judas is denigrated as a thief and as someone who accepted money for betraying Jesus.

Jesus is anointed as the messiah in the house of Simon the leper. That dinner was not a hot ticket social event in a fashionable village outside Jerusalem. One Biblical scholar suggests that the name Bethany may mean 'the house of the poor'. Archaeological evidence suggests that Bethany was as close to the holy city as lepers were allowed and inscriptions have been found that make it look as though Bethany in the time of Jesus was a Galilean community.

So the Messiah, the unlikely king Jesus, was revealed by the action of an unnamed woman. He was at home in the house of the poor, with Simon the leper, with his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and probably with others from Galilee.

In its shortest and original form, the end of Mark's Gospel is profoundly disturbing. The women came to an empty tomb at which a young man, an angel, sitting outside on the right hand side, said he is not here. In Mark, there was no body and there are no resurrection appearances.

"So [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."

(Mk 16.8)

It does not sound like the end of something billed as 'good news'. Fear and amazement was how Mark described the response of many to the life and ministry of Jesus. This experience is strikingly different to Luke's resurrection appearances and the ascension. It is unlike Matthew's risen Christ promising to be with the disciples to the end of the age. And it is quite different to Jesus in John's Gospel abiding in the Father and us in him putting the community back together again. For Mark the risen Christ is absent and we are in the times between his going and the coming of the kingdom of God.

But the body of Christ, now risen and absent, was the means by which that life has been received by his followers down the ages. "Take (this bread) it is my body... Take (this wine) it is my blood." Jesus will never again drink of the vine, "until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God". It is the hope by which we live and the reason why the anointing of his body begins Mark's Passion in which Jesus is the Messiah who announces that the kingdom of God has come near.

Finding the Language – Mark 14.26-50

“When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives...” and at that point we’ve switched from reading to singing. To hear the Passion sung both heightens its significance – this is special – and makes it sound strange and unfamiliar to us. Having decided that this year we would read Mark’s Passion, and having discovered that the late John Sanders, who was Organist and Master of the Choristers at Gloucester Cathedral, had set the central section to music, we have something of a mix today. It is fascinating that Sanders decided to leave out the last verse of this section, presumably because it is odd, a distracting irrelevant detail, he could make nothing of.

“A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.”

(Mark 14.51,52)

The Greek word Mark uses for ‘young man’ is *neaniskon*. The only other time Mark uses this word is at the resurrection of the young man, *neaniskon*, dressed in white outside the empty tomb.

Mark’s Gospel undoubtedly has a close connection with St Peter. We have heard already heard things about Peter which are not just about his primacy among the disciples and in the early Church, and part of a group memory. Quite a lot about Peter in Mark’s gospel is almost personal reminiscence and not always to his credit. There is quite a lot in this Gospel that could only have come from Peter and it is worth listening to the Passion with that in mind.

A tradition from the second century suggests this young man, otherwise unknown but who ran away naked and reappears outside the empty tomb as the angel, the messenger, is Mark, who wrote the Gospel as Peter’s scribe in Rome. Well, maybe.

What is more certain is that this is a story in which a linen cloth, dressing up and being stripped bare has significance. All the disciples forsook Jesus who had been betrayed, arrested and bound. Like them, the young man fled, so exposed by events that he left his linen cloth and ran away naked. The body is a recurring image in Mark’s Passion and this young man’s nakedness is embarrassing. He ran away in the garden of Gethsemane, a bit like Adam and Eve after eating the apple hid from God when they realised they were naked in the Garden of Eden.

On Easter morning, outside the empty tomb, the risen Jesus now free, unbound and gone, the young man is seated robed in white, not just in a linen cloth but as Jesus had been on the mountain of the transfiguration. Through Christ’s Passion the young man is stripped bare and re-clothed on Easter morning. This is how it is for those who share in Christ’s cross and resurrection. On Easter day the candidates for baptism in the early Church wore white. Baptism is what brought them and us into the Eucharistic community where bread is broken and wine poured ‘in memory of him’.

For the early Church, with a mission to the whole world, it was inevitable they would seek to understand Jesus through the history and experience of Judaism. If you have looked at the paintings of The Passion by Keith West that have been on display in our Crypt Gallery in the second half of Lent, you will have seen someone using the Hebrew scriptural tradition in relation to Jesus. Four pairs of paintings show a figure from what we now think of as the ‘Old Testament’ linked with some aspect of Jesus’s Passion: Jacob, Abraham, Isaac and Jonah.

Jacob wrestled with a stranger who turned out to be God. He left that encounter wounded but blessed. He was renamed 'Israel' because he had striven with God. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus wrestled with God that if it were possible this hour might pass from him. It was night and he was on his own because his disciples slept.

Abraham had the extraordinary faith to be willing to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. In the end, God provided a lamb and Isaac lived. Jesus is shown as the lamb of God, the Father sacrificing the son for the sake of the world.

David, Jesse's young son who slew Goliath and overcame the Philistines, danced before the Lord. Jesus, the son of David, by his death overcomes death and is, in Sydney Carter's well known song 'the Lord of the dance'.

Jonah, thrown overboard from the ship on which he was trying to escape God's call because he was fearful, was three days in the belly of the whale before being spewed out on to dry ground to prophecy against the city of Nineveh. At the empty tomb, Jesus gone, the young man dressed in white points us on to Galilee.

With the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are right at the edge of what previous experience can help us understand. We are also at the limits of what language can express. Something new is taking place and finding the language is problematic. So Jesus the messiah is the new Adam, like Jacob, Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah, a prophet greater than Ezekiel... He is the Passover lamb. The association is clear. If Passover is a remembrance of Israel's ancestors who had been enslaved in Egypt and a celebration of freedom, then Jesus at Passover brings us to a new kind of freedom.

In the encounter with Christ we find ourselves embarrassingly bare, all desires are known, no secrets hidden, *and* like the young man sitting outside the empty tomb, there is the hope we will be clothed in God's glory.

The Silent Witness – Mark 14.53-72

Geography matters in Mark's Gospel. Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee is baptised in the Jordan by John. The Spirit descended on him like a dove and after forty days in the wilderness he came proclaiming the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news. At an extraordinary pace, his ministry in Galilee moves from synagogue to house; people are healed; and there is great conflict with the religious authorities. Typically, people were said not to understand, to be amazed and afraid. Those who did recognise Jesus as the Messiah were told to tell no one.

Almost exactly half way through the Gospel, and as far away from Jerusalem as Jesus ever went, right up in the north country at Caesarea Philippi, there is what was in every sense a turning point.

He asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am? And they answered him, 'John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and still others one of the prophets'. He asked them 'But you, who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

(Mark 3.27-30)

Jesus then said to the crowd, as well as to his disciples, that, "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it..."

Straight away they head south. After the transfiguration and another healing miracle, "he was teaching his disciples, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.'"

(Mark 9.30-32)

From Capernaum, across the Jordan valley into Judea and in less than two chapters they are on the road to Jerusalem, entering from the Mount of Olives, where the Garden of Gethsemane is, on what we now remember as Palm Sunday. The temple then became the centre of conflict, Jesus lamenting its corruption, its lifeless stones and its transience. "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." (Mk 13.2)

That Jesus is the Messiah is an open secret in Mark's Gospel, but he can neither say it about himself nor wants others to proclaim it. So when the high priest asked Jesus what he had to say about the accusations being made against him, he was silent, and his silence was powerful.

Radio 4's Lent talks this year were on the absence of God. Frank Field spoke about the need for a secular Lent so that people who don't believe in God get the rhythms of the year, a period of fasting and simple living and a chance to work out what really matters. I don't know when his talk was recorded but in this current economic climate there will be a few who know just what he means and not because they have chosen it. Sr Frances Dominica, the nun who founded the first children's hospice, talked about the way God often seems absent when we most want God near. It's not comfortable, but the 'where was God' theology is pretty well known in a church like this and the answer can only be that God is on the cross and sharing our suffering. Perhaps that's why he seems absent. An Oxford professor, George Pattison, told of how he found it helpful that God was not always sitting on his shoulder. He welcomed a bit of distance, Divine restraint, which

allows us to be human and to take responsibility for ourselves. If God were always here, sorting out each small difficulty and each major problem, we would never grow up and we would never be human.

Around the turn of the year, three people connected with this community died in mid-life. One was a bit older than Jesus, one the same age, and one was younger. In Central London we are probably not close enough as a community for many people to feel the full impact of this but it felt very tough. One of the parents asked me, what I assume they will all have thought, about the sort of God that allows this to happen. Such a God was not the God this person had previously believed in. Their belief was shaken not by atheism but by the unwelcome realisation that God was absent when they most wanted presence and action. They realised life has more chance in it and less certainty than they had previously believed. Almighty God appeared to choose not to be almighty.

In the 1970's a Church of England parish priest called Bill Vanstone wrote a wonderful book called 'Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense'. It has become a Christian classic with telling little insights like, "the Church is like a swimming pool with all the noise coming from the shallow end". The hymn we sang at the start of this section is a poem by Vanstone, from which the book's title was taken. It reflects on the nature of the loving God who shows endless self restraint whilst acting in ways that tell of what that generous, gracious love must be.

Thou art God; no monarch thou,
thron'd in easy state to reign;
thou art God, whose arms of love
aching spent the world sustain.

There has been false testimony and the religious leaders have whipped up accusations. Even Peter denied he knew him. In Mark, the one who had been silent now speaks truly.

Again the High Priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"
Jesus said, "I am"
And for that,
"All of them condemned him as deserving death".

A False Dawn – Mark 15.1-24

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he told them to ask for what they want. It is marvellous advice, not because God gives us everything we ask for, but because the process of asking deepens what we really want and draws us closer to what God wants for us.

Each day in this church, near the beginning of Morning Prayer we say, “The night has passed and the day lies open before us, let us pray with one heart and mind.” After a period of silence, we “rejoice in the gift of this new day”. Each dawn brings new hope and, as Arnold Bennett observed, we all begin the day equal. Each of us has a purse with 24 hours of time in it and we can each choose how to spend it.

“As soon as it was morning the chief priest, with the elders and the scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate.”

(Mk 15.1)

In the face of many accusations, and Pilate’s central question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus made no further answer.

Politicians need to work the crowd. They depend on it, and not just in a democracy. Pilate was clever because he thought he could avoid putting himself on the line by asking the crowd who they wanted him to release. If he really thought Jesus was innocent, he was impaled by his own lack of principle. The crowd chose Barabbas.

I suppose Pilate might have thought of himself as the victim in these circumstances. The poor Governor put the question to the crowd in such a way as he hoped they would choose what was right. But they didn’t and there was no going back, not without losing all authority. So Pilate satisfied the crowd. Either he didn’t care about his own conscience or he felt this was the price of playing his part in what must have seemed a pretty minor affair of state.

Good people often sympathise with the underdog but Jesus was a trouble maker so the crowd shouted for Barabbas to be set free. His victims were forgotten and Jesus would be crucified and he would be forgotten, too.

People who claim for themselves they are the victim are often self-pitying and sometimes wrong. As Amnesty International realised, other people can point to the plight of the victim much more reliably and effectively than the victim can do for themselves. This is part of the wisdom of Jesus’s silence. He is the sacrificial victim, and he does not need to tell us so.

Thinking of yourself as a victim needs great care. Last week the racist British National Party produced the most offensive advert I have seen in years. It headlines words from a verse from John (15.20) in which Jesus said, “If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you”. Alongside an image of a white Jesus are the words, “Ban, persecution, intimidation.” Then there’s the question, “What would Jesus do?” followed by the non sequitur, “Vote BNP!” How on earth? They managed to avoid drawing attention to the end of the verse in which Jesus said they should keep his word (and love one another).

Jesus was stripped, dressed in mock-imperial purple and crown of thorns, and spat on. Stripped again they led him to crucifixion at Golgotha, compelling Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross and

casting lots for his clothing. Cyrene was in North Africa. Presumably Simon was part of the Jewish diaspora and in Jerusalem. That his sons are named, Alexander and Rufus, suggests he was known to the Christina community for whom Mark was written. An African carried the cross for Jesus, as Africa carries so much of the suffering of our world. At the vigil in church last night, when we watched and waited with Christ, the sanctuary was stripped. I was really struck that in the darkness there was a blaze of light at the back of the church by the memorial to the South African victims of injustice and violence from the years of apartheid. The dignity and strength of the Soweto school kid depicted carrying his dead friend in that sculpture by Chaim Stephenson speaks to many about the way the suffering of the world can be carried.

When the G20 met in London last week I prayed each day for the G168 who were not at the table. It wasn't my idea but it caught the imagination and made a point. Last Sunday one of the choir wondered how I came up with the number and thought it should be 172. So 4 countries are so poor and insignificant they didn't even make it into my prayers! Anyway, the G20 were really 22 but the numbers were symbolic, not literal. We are having a hard time in the current crisis, and some of us are feeling victims of it, but whatever we are experiencing is as nothing when compared with the lot of the 2 billion who live on less than \$2 a day and the 800 million on \$1.

In Greek the word *krisis* means both a judgement and an opportunity. In Hebrew the word translated crisis also means 'a birthing stool'. From this crisis which is not just economic and financial but environmental, political, social, moral and spiritual, a new order needs to be born.

There's a dreadful moment near the end of Arthur Miller's 'A View From the Bridge', which is on in St Martin's Lane. The world of a family of New York Italians collapses, caused by a young couple's determined love. From the outside it looks as though the young man's love might be conditional, the way for an illegal immigrant to obtain citizenship. A devastating and reckless betrayal leads to arrests and the murder of the betrayer who shortly before had been reflecting that, "Truth is holy". Even amidst self-deception and betrayal, it is holy, and we need it to be. So is love, justice, peace, faith, hope, joy... the things of God's kingdom that lead to the repair, healing and transformation of the world. The mistake would be to be overwhelmed by whatever goes wrong and despair into thinking that God's kingdom ceases to be possible. What seems so often to be the case is that it is when things go wrong, God breaks through.

Darkness at Noon – Mark 15.25-39

According to Sartre, “Hell is other people” but for many it’s isolation that we dread. A few years ago a Church of England report suggested an image of hell as eternal isolation, of being cut off from any relationship with people and things. We want to belong, be part of, to have the comfort of one another.

My mother, who had nursed in Hackney through the blitz, had, as a young woman, seen death often. It did not frighten her but she did admit to fear about how she would die. In particular she wanted her children to know how much it mattered that someone would be with her, holding her hand. In the end, it was my brother who did a brilliant job, but, as so often happens, she died in the early morning, a few hours after he had left her late at night. A nurse at St Joseph’s Hospice was with her at the end doing what my mother had done for many others, and showing why we need good professionals because we cannot do it all ourselves.

Through Mark’s passion the disciples have fallen away: Judas, the disciples who forsook him and fled, the young man who ran off naked, Peter. They have all dropped away. Jesus is crucified with two robbers and in Mark there’s no distinction, as in Luke, that one was good and asked to be remembered by Jesus in his kingdom. They were simply robbers

The disciples were absent at the crucifixion and so was God. The cry of Psalm 22 is just terrible: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It couldn’t get darker, but just to emphasise the point, Mark says there was a total eclipse of the sun lasting the full three hours. This was not the friendly absence of God, it was real and it was desolating, “And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last”.

Once he got to Jerusalem, the conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders centred on the temple. Not one stone of that great building would be left standing. The imagery of the curtain of the temple being torn in two is the destruction of the purpose of the temple. God previously veiled but present in the Holy of Holies into which the high priest entered once a year, is now fully revealed but in Christ on the cross. The manner of his death was such that the centurion makes the great concluding statement of faith in Mark’s Gospel that “Truly this man was the son of God.” Mark’s witnesses at the beginning and end of the Passion of Christ are the unnamed woman who anointed him in the House of Simon the leper at Bethany, and a soldier, a Gentile not of the house of Israel.

This church is named after a Roman soldier, Martin, and I am struck that the people who belong here gather around the cross. The gift of many homeless people in this St Martin’s community means that suffering is very evident. It opens us both to the needs of others and to our own vulnerability.

Over the last few years we have worked hard and spent a lot of money on renewing the buildings to equip St Martin’s for service in the 21st century. We are more than a church and are a major arts venue, tourist attraction, meeting place, education centre and social service provider. We want this place to speak well for Christ in Trafalgar Square at the heart of this great city. Over the last 18 months, the Renewal of St Martin’s has been unwrapped in stages. This is the first Holy Week and Easter with our new east window. It was still being installed last Easter and not properly visible. There was controversy in its selection but I am amazed how little that controversy has endured.

Our mid-week chaplains say the window has transformed their contact with people coming into church. By asking them what they see, they quickly get into deep conversations about God. It is a cross reflected in water, the bread of the Eucharist, the head or body of Christ, the veil between this world and beyond, the flow of energy, the burst of creation... I very much enjoy its different moods at different times of the day and night and the way in which people use the window as an aid to prayer and contemplation.

Two weeks ago, at the end of a mid-week service, I was confronted in the porch by a group of eight elderly people, seven women and one man. They seemed a bit hostile. "What's with that broken window?", asked the man. "It's not broken, it's new", I replied completely missing the point like one of the disciples in Mark's Gospel. I started to tell them about it, that it is by an Iranian woman and that alone giving it significance as a focus for prayer in a church in central London at the start of the twenty first century. They said they were surprised it wasn't stained glass – my heart sank – and that this was much better. "But why is it broken?", the man asked again, now really engaged with what we were all looking at carefully. "It's like something has been thrown though the cross and smashed a hole in it."

Broken through and broken open, the cross in Mark's Passion causes an earthquake, the curtains of the temple torn down, and in the manner of his death held before us on the cross the centurion recognises that "Truly this man was the son of God".

The Day of Preparation – Mark 15.40-41 and then Mark 15.42-47 outside

The women have stayed the course, looking on from a distance; the same women who will go to the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week. Of all his followers, only they were there, at a distance, when they nailed him to the tree, only they saw where they laid him in the tomb.

This last reading has been divided between what has been read inside church and what will be read outside by one of the younger women of St Martin's, Martha who was confirmed last year. That seemed consistent with the importance given to the women in the Gospel of Mark.

A Gospel is not a history of the deeds of Jesus, or a biography of his earthly life, but a good news for us in the present tense. When Mark says it was evening and the day of Preparation for the Sabbath, he is implying that it was the day of preparation for much more than the Sabbath.

The end of Mark's Gospel is a problem we have been struggling with all through this service. The women who went to the tomb are told by the young man to,

“Go and tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

(Mk 16.7-8)

It is such an embarrassing ending that people quickly decided it was incomplete. There's a short addition, actually rather beautiful:

“And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.”

But you don't have to be a literary genius to hear a different tone nor an academic theologian to detect a different style to what we have seen and heard in Mark's Gospel.

Clearly that short addition did not do enough to ease the difficulty, so there's a longer second addition gathering some of the resurrection appearances – to Mary Magdalene, and on what must have been the journey to Emmaus, and to the eleven, whom he upbraided for their lack of faith and stubbornness because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen!

As I have got older I have noticed that at different stages of my life my favourite Gospel has changed. When I was young, I liked the brevity, pace and immediacy of Mark's Gospel. I remember Alec McCowan's one man performance of it in the Authorised Version and of being surprised at how much laughter Alec got from his audiences. It is full of good jokes. Bach showed me the beauty of Matthew, whose use of the Hebrew Scriptures, and especially his depiction of Christ as the Suffering Servant, is breathtaking. As an East End parish priest I remember an older colleague telling me that really it's Luke's picture of Jesus we all believe: Christ the King but known in the poor, and a gospel of infinite forgiveness and generosity. In my 50's it's John whose poetry and pastoral love really fires me. His insistence that Christ was raised up on the cross, not just in the resurrection, meets life which as a parish priest I know it to be. John's Gospel is set in a story of creation, that in the beginning was the Word and that darkness has never overcome it.

With the richness of these other Gospels, it's easy to understand why the end of Mark's Gospel was quickly thought to be inadequate but we would do better to trust its insight.

Joseph of Arimathea was a respected member of the council that put Jesus to death. What sets him apart is that he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. That kingdom was what Jesus preached from his baptism onwards, and it was divisive. For Mark, the good news of Jesus was disturbing and that's why it helps us to see clearly.

In the reverse of what happened when the young man ran away naked, Joseph brought a linen cloth, and taking down the dead body he wrapped it in the linen cloth and laid it in the tomb. The women saw where the body was laid.

Like the male disciples, we are so useless at understanding and living in response to Jesus. The women in the Gospel, and perhaps in Church, are more consistent and encouraging, but anyone with an ounce of common sense who has even an inkling of what has been going on will respond with fear and trembling. For this is the Gospel according to Mark, that Jesus said,

“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it.”

The hellish isolation we fear is when our selfishness gets in the way of real relationships. Broken and laid bare on this way of the cross, we find what is good, true, just... and that the empty tomb is the place where we, too, will be clothed in glory.