

24th Sunday (B)

12th September 2021

'Mark's Gospel: the turning point'

Is 50: *I offered my back to those who struck me
the snares of death ...* James 2: *I will prove to you that I have faith by showing
you my good deeds.* Ps 114: *They surrounded me,
Mk 8: 27–35: 'You are the Christ' ... He must suffer
many things, ... be rejected, ... be killed (ESV)*

(Last week I spoke of the *Ephphatha* as falling 'victim' to the pandemic. Well ...) Another 'victim' of the pandemic has been the 'Year of the Word'! In fact, you might never have even heard of the initiative. It was established by our bishops for 2020 — the 1600th anniversary of the death in 420AD of St Jerome, master translator and Scripture scholar; and the 10th anniversary of Pope Benedict's wonderful post-synodal document on the Word of God, *Verbum Domini* (2010). I went for it with great gusto! I started printing the monthly reflections as inserts in the Newsletter; I ordered multiple copies of a pocket edition of St Matthew's Gospel for distribution on the 'Sunday of the Word of God' which is in January; that same Sunday I had a Rite of Blessing for the parish readers prior to the Liturgy of the Word; and throughout 2020 and into 2021 I quoted short excerpts of *Verbum Domini* on the front page of the Newsletter ... Because when the pandemic hit, the bishops extended the

'Year of the Word' into 2021. Even so, of course, it rather lost its momentum with the pandemic disruption lasting for so much of this year too. But it lasts until Jan 2022, which still gives us 5 months to make good use of this initiative!

Of course, whereas when the 'Year of the Word' was launched it was the year of St Matthew ('Year A'), it's now 'Year B,' the year of St Mark, the shortest and most pithy of all the Gospels. It's the Gospel I'd read with the Confirmation candidates in the parish, as it it's direct, readable, and very accessible even for teenagers for the most part. Mark is just 16 chapters long, and it doesn't waste any time. It has an urgency about it, keeps moving, shows Jesus keeping up the pace, keen to proclaim the Gospel message in ever new places. It's why I chose to read the Gospel this morning in the new [ESV](#) (English Standard Version) — a 21st c. translation that is shortly going to be the standard translation of the Scriptures for Mass in our country. I find that the ESV really brings out the momentum of St Mark's Gospel. I used the ESV back in Holy Week, for both the Palm Sunday and the Good Friday

Passion narratives, because my parish congregation weren't using the parish Mass books this year ("cos Covid"!), so they didn't have the words in front of them. It helped me to use a new translation, as I had really to concentrate, proclaiming words that were unfamiliar, and not the Gospel words I'd read many a time over 20+ years. I discovered a real freshness to the proclamation, and in particular when I read the Marcan Passion on Palm Sunday the thing I couldn't believe was how many 'and's there were! Almost every sentence begins with 'and'! (Just like we were taught not to do at school!! ... Mark breaks all the rules!). "*And* Jesus did this, *and* Jesus said this, *and* then Jesus went here ... *and* ... *and* ... *and* ..."

Now this isn't some peculiarity of the ESV, something they've added as a stylistic choice. No, this is what the Greek says: *καὶ ... καὶ ... καὶ ... (and ... and ... and ...)*.

It's just as true of today's passage from Mk 8: "and" occurs at the start of almost every sentence! So, even when Our Lord takes the apostles far away from the crowds, away from the bustle of Lake Galilee, Capernaum, and fishing,

and up to a remote spot in the north, Caesarea Philippi, there's still an urgency about his time with them out there. It's precious time, this 'retreat' away from distractions, and Jesus gets straight to the point, even asking them as they still on the way, "Who do people say I am?" — we know that this is a warm-up question. His real intent is to ask them the more searching, personal question, "Who do *you* say I am?" This is the turning-point in the Gospel of Mark. This Gospel is constructed entirely around this passage. 16 chapters; and this is chapter 8 ... St Mark deliberately places this event at the very centre of his Gospel, as it contains the key question, and the key answer. It's the nub of the matter: "*Who do you say I am? ... Who have you come to believe Me to be?*" ... And then, almost without hesitation, St Peter (of course, it's always Peter!) blurts out his answer: "*You are the Christ!*" — that's to say, 'the Messiah,' the One so long-expected by the Jews. No doubt Peter is voicing what all the apostles have been inching their way towards, as they've experienced Jesus's teaching, miracles, compassion, authority, in the first half of the

Gospel ... Now they're put on the spot by Jesus: the crunch point, the decision moment, has come: what are they to say? Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, expresses that timeless truth: "You are [in fact] the Christ."

No wonder this moment is the centre-piece of St Mark's Gospel: it's the question that matters most in our lives — 'who is Jesus for me?' — and it's the answer that is so life-giving when made personally from my heart and soul: '*You are the Christ*' ... You are the Christ, the Saviour, not just of mankind in some vague, generalized, impersonal, way, but you are Christ the Saviour for *me*, the lover of *my* soul. When did I make that personal commitment to Jesus? What age was I? When did I first say it, and mean it with full intention as giving the whole meaning of my life over to Christ? Have I in fact yet made that personal, definitive, statement of faith, in union with the apostles and the whole Church of all ages? Take your lead from Peter as he allows his love for Jesus to spill over into a resolute confession of faith: "*You are the Christ.*"

But let's not forget, there's the whole 2nd half of St

Mark's Gospel still to come. This confession of faith by Peter is only the mid-point. The honeymoon doesn't last long, a matter of a few verses, and Peter has to learn quickly what Jesus's 'being the Messiah' actually entails. St Peter still has much to learn, and the whole idea of the Messiah he has acknowledged suffering and dying cruelly is abhorrent to him. Yet this, also, must be part of the faith he has embraced and committed himself to.

For us, whenever it was — or whenever it will be — that we truly commit(ted) our lives to Jesus, we will always have much to learn. There will always be the '2nd half of the Gospel' to come; the 'harder part,' perhaps. Each and every saint has found this, and lived it, after that first, vivid example of St Peter; so we never need worry that the challenges life may send us — even our heaviest crosses and darkest doubts — mean that the Lord doesn't walk with us all the way. "*You are the Christ, Lord Jesus — you are always the Christ, carrying the Cross, carrying my crosses, saving my life. You instil in me the urgency of the Gospel message: follow Me, now, follow Me always.*"