

ARMAGH READERS – TALK 1

Saturday 10 October 2015

Introduction

All ministry is the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ on earth in which you and I have been entrusted to be a part, by His grace.

Two figures from the New Testament from whom I believe we may learn something – St Peter and St Mark.

Not the Letters of Peter or the Gospel of Mark but **the people** – what we know of them. Ancient tradition that Peter was an important source for Mark's Gospel. Some very personal details and also it's unsparing in what it has to say about Peter – his failings as well as his strengths. Perhaps only Peter would have provided such detail.

Matthew 16:13-23

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' ¹⁴ And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵ He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock* I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Peter

When you think of St Peter, what would you think of **first**? For me - a man who seemed to have an unerring ability to keep falling flat on his face, **BUT** also an equally unerring ability to allow himself to be picked up and put back on his feet.

Very human / very flawed. Courageous but perhaps at times more bravado than courage. Christ kept calling him back again and again. Very much at the centre of Christ's plan NOT because he was perfect or obedient - many disciples more obedient and biddable but Peter had the courage to make mistakes and to move forward from those mistakes - a rare gift, a rare GRACE.

Most people can never admit that they are wrong and in need of correction by Christ, and of new direction perhaps many many times in life. A saint is not a person who never makes mistakes - indeed it is hard to see anyone who never makes mistakes achieving anything worthwhile - a saint is someone who has the courage to make mistakes and to learn from them.

Lancelot Andrews (English Bishop in early 17century) said:

“Lord I thank you for my call, recall, yea, many calls besides”

Yet Peter unquestionably not only the foremost of Christ’s disciples but also a major figure - **the** major figure in the early Church - “On this rock I will build my Church .

G K Chesterton said:

“All the empire and kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continual weakness, that they were founded on strong men. But this one thing, the historic Christian Church , was founded on a weak man, and for that reason it is indestructible.. for no chain is stronger than its weakest link..”

A knowledge of weakness allows Christ’s grace to work. A certainty of our strength is the obstacle to Christ’s power at work in our lives.

Where and how did Christ put Peter back on his feet

In John’s Gospel, Christ says to Peter “Feed my sheep” - 3 times perhaps to match the three denials that Peter made of Christ.

More important - Do you love me? The reply “yes” and the command “Feed my sheep” We can only love Christ when we are feeding his sheep. That is the call to every Christian disciple.

Do you really love me - then feed my sheep. Make a difference / convince others, especially those who are weak and vulnerable.

I believe that the greatest challenge to us as we face a frightened and confused world, is to COMMEND the Gospel to the world in which we live. Not just in the pulpit but in our everyday discipleship.

St Francis of Assissi said preach the Gospel, use words if necessary.

More and more people are losing their grip on the faith in the world around us and the feeding of their souls is something which Jesus Christ has entrusted to every, yes **every** disciple, from the youngest to the oldest in this Church today, the least experienced to the most experienced yes, preach the Gospel, use words when necessary

If we to be disciples of Jesus Christ here in this Diocese - if our work as readers is more than sentimental mush or a prolonged ego-trip, then we must indeed set ourselves to witness to hope and of love in a land becoming increasing estranged from that truth and love, it must be without fear, and it must also be without arrogance and vanity. For we, as a community and as individuals, LIKE SAINT PETER, are not going to make it in our own strength - we are not going to make it alone. We are, like St Peter, going to fail at times, sometimes we are going to become angry and frustrated with others (and perhaps even

with Christ), we are going to stumble and feel weary, and we can face God with precious little to offer - **except** trust in God's grace given to us in the love of Christ, crucified and risen. And because of that grace going ahead of us, **God's grace always ahead of us and refusing to stay where we want it to be.**

We - as a Church, as a Diocese, as a parish, as individual Christian people - have to accept that there is no such thing as staying spiritually where we are, whether as a community or as individuals; the alternative to change through growth is change through decay.

But there is hope if, in the ministry that you and I have been called to share, we have the courage to ask the question repeatedly and honestly **at every point** in that ministry,

- What is this actually doing for Jesus Christ and his Kingdom?
- Is this action really calculated to advance the Kingdom?
- Will this actually damage the witness of the Kingdom?
- Or is this utterly irrelevant to the Kingdom.

If we can only have the courage to keep asking those hard questions of ourselves, then we will most certainly be following the example of St Peter in bringing the Gospel to those around us.

And, at the end of it all, **we will be judged** - not on whether we were perfect, or even particularly good but, like St Peter, we will be judged on whether we have the willingness to accept when we were wrong and to grow from there and whether we obeyed the command of Christ to forget ourselves and our own vanity and our own selfishness and to seek before everything else to feed his sheep - to bring the Gospel, by word and by deed, to those around us.

Prayer

Almighty God,
who inspired your apostle Saint Peter
to confess Jesus as Christ and Son of the living God:
Build up your Church upon this rock,
that in unity and peace it may proclaim one truth
and follow one Lord, your Son our Saviour Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

ARMAGH READERS – TALK 2

Saint Mark – a continuation from what I was saying about St Peter.

Acts 15. 35-41

³⁵ Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

³⁶ After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’

³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. ³⁹ The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers* commending him to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Introduction

The hero in the passage from Acts was neither Mark, even less Paul, but of course Barnabas – Barnabas- the son of encouragement. Mark doesn't emerge from the story very happily – he had deserted the cause in Pamphylia. Paul comes out of it worse – he shows an unforgiving streak and an implacable unwillingness to give the unfortunate young evangelist Mark a second chance. Barnabas is the one who gives encouragement to someone who has made a mistake but who (like Peter) wishes to pick himself up and to prove himself worthy again.

But of course there are lessons aplenty here even from the perspective of Mark.

You were not commissioned as readers – you will not be commissioned as readers - to do everything right and to get everything right. You will need the encouragement, from time to time, of the Barnabas, whether or not he or she is wearing a clerical collar. Had it occurred to you that it actually took huge humility and courage for Mark to continue his task of ministry at all?

Mark would have known Jesus and probably been within the group of disciples. Mark was therefore an original, top-flight apostle - unlike Paul, who had never known Jesus personally, not that Paul was a man to be put off by a minor detail such as this. So for Mark to be rebuffed by someone without his advantages was no small snub. Maybe he needed it, just as we all need to be told off roundly by some deeply unpleasant person who just happens to be right.

And within the ministry to which we're called, that is true for us. This is part of the making of an apostleship, the making of an evangelist, the making of a reader of the church of God – take the harsh criticism from whatever quarter, take the encouragement from whatever quarter. God's grace is not a grace to either impeccability or infallibility.

But to move on with Mark – yes, growing in ministry is surely what we see in him – growing up into Christ and I want you now to hear some words from the Letter to the Ephesians..

Ephesians 4

¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from 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.

Growing into truth and responding to truth as part of what it is to be mature – “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ”. **The work of a lifetime – none of us has reached the full maturity to which Christ calls us.**

Not seeking an easy truth or being ready to peddle the Gospel as easy truth for there is nothing easy in the truth of the gospel. What is so refreshing about the brief portrait of Mark in the New Testament is that we are given an honest picture of a young immature and impulsive young man who grows into mature apostleship as an evangelist of the Kingdom – who learns what it is to be faced by the ultimate truth of Christ and not to measure up, but who does not therefore retreat but who grows into this truth of the Gospel.

This truth is always something of which to be slightly afraid and which we *should* find blinding in its implications. To think that we have found all truth, and need no longer continue the painful search for it is the mark of the person who has actually lost interest in the truth.

In that famous phrase of Jack Nicholson in the film *A Few Good Men*, “**they can’t handle the truth.**”

In a remarkable sermon preached to the University of Berlin just before his own persecution by the Nazis began, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached about Our Lord’s trial before Pilate where Pilate asks dismissively “What is truth?”

As Bonhoeffer went on to say, **Truth is then crucified by Pilate and it is Pilate who is judged by the truth. But he adds, “It is not you who ask for the truth, but the truth that asks for you”. That is the perspective we are asked to put on our lives on this earth, our lives as Christian disciples, “The truth asks for you”.**

Whether it is:

- trying to understand what life is for, what life is about.
- seeking to do the right thing in a morass of confusion.
- struggling with the bewilderment of suffering or loss.
- wrestling with forces of injustice, darkness and evil.
- deciding what to say in a frightening difficult situation where speaking the truth will bring only trouble and pain.

The truth asks for you..

The truth, the final truth, *the truth that is God who is himself the final truth*, is there, asking for us. We do not make the truth up as we go along, or decide on which truth would be easiest to produce to get us into the least trouble, or to get us out of trouble as painlessly as possible.

The truth - ultimate truth, the truth of the gospel - asks for our response – ALL OF THE TIME.

Why the person of the evangelist Mark is indeed an exemplar of the gospel is because we see growth, we see a maturing, we see mistakes and we see redemption beyond failure, and so we see meaning in that well-worn phrase, “the truth of the gospel”

It is a truth which is asking for us, truth – the truth of Jesus Christ - that never stops asking for us.

Prayer

Almighty God,
who enlightened your holy Church
through the inspired witness of your evangelist Saint Mark:
Grant that we, being firmly grounded
in the truth of the gospel,
may be faithful to its teaching both in word and deed;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.