

First Sunday of Easter Year B

We are now in the Easter Season, which continues until Pentecost.

Either Acts 10: 34-43

This is an account of one of the hinge-points in the New Testament. Peter discovers that God's kingdom embraces not only the Jews, but also Gentiles.

On close inspection, we learn much about the state of Christian belief at this point. Clearly Peter and his fellow Apostles bear witness to what they had seen and heard, of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and of the commission they had received to spread the good news. But their interpretation of the facts – what they believed about Jesus – were to move a long way beyond what we see here. Verse 26, in particular, leaves us slightly uncertain whether Peter believed that Jesus was divine. It suggests, to the contrary, that Jesus' status underwent change when he was anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, presumably on the occasion of his baptism.

Or Isa 25: 6-9

Much of the first part of Isaiah – chapters 1-39 – is gloomy in tone, overshadowed by the calamitous policies of its recent kings and the degradation of its public life. The hand of Babylon can be felt, approaching from the East. In chapter 40 the mood changes to one of hope, return and restoration. But this divide does not amount to an impenetrable wall. Chapter 42, for example, contains strong criticism, while here in Chapter 25 we find a reassuring voice promising an end to misery.

Ps 118: [1-2], 14-24]

This psalm was also set for Palm Sunday of Year B – this year.

It contains much that is familiar: verse 1 is a refrain that occurs again in verse 29, thus “topping and tailing” the psalm; verses 22 and 23 are quoted by Jesus (Matt 21:42, Mk 12:10, Lk 20:17) in the parable of the vineyard in which the son of the owner is done to death by the men employed to look after the vines. Verse 24, likewise, is often used as an opening sentence at worship.

Either 1 Cor 15: 1-11

Here Paul embarks on a résumé of the gospel he has preached to his Corinthian friends in the past. His problem is that the Corinthian Christians are – in a sense – “losing the plot”; they have been assimilating their former metropolitan lifestyle into their Christian living, and complimenting themselves on their adroitness in doing so, while at the same time losing their grip of Christian centralities.

Paul begins here with the basic groundwork – the Resurrection. First, the things he was himself taught about the resurrection of Jesus (Jesus died, was buried, raised on the third day, and appeared to a number of witnesses).

Then, Jesus appeared to Paul himself – yes, even Paul, who had been persecuting the church. Verse 11 carries a whiff of “take it or leave it”: this is it, the gospel that all the apostles have preached, including me.

Or Acts 10: 34-43

For notes on this reading see above.

Either John 20: 1-18

Of all the resurrection stories this is surely the one with the most dramatic power. John depicts Mary’s utter distraction as she discovers the empty tomb. The two male disciples whom she summons to see for themselves are characterised in a few words. Peter is physically slow (he arrived second), but direct – even hasty – in his response to what he sees. The other disciple (the one Jesus loved – the beloved disciple) is fleet of foot, but then hesitant.

Because they have no explanation for what has happened, the two men simply go home, leaving Mary to wander aimless and tearful around the garden. Then comes the exchange with the “gardener” – a scene which invites dramatic retelling, but which surely demands the highest competence in both acting and direction if it is not to become utterly banal.

What are we left with as (metaphorically) we leave the theatre and make our own way home?

First, there is the matter of the baffling evidence, from which one woman and two men can draw no useful conclusions. The reference to the disciple who “saw and believed” when he looked into the tomb doesn’t indicate a mature belief ripened by reflection and experience; “for they did not yet understand”.

Mary’s failure to recognise Jesus. Is this really so surprising? Only two days before she had seen Jesus taken down, lifeless, from a cross, and placed in a tomb which was then sealed. It’s hardly astonishing that she is not mentally prepared for the experience of encountering him alive. Many people can recall experiences in which, in one context, they fail to recognise someone they know well in another context.

Or Mark 16: 1-8

The closing verses of Mark’s gospel present us with problems. Present-day translators are not faced with one pristine copy in the original Greek; there are many manuscripts, and they differ in detail and sometimes more significantly. Here they differ in the way they bring the gospel to an end. In some manuscripts the story just fades out with the words “For they were afraid ...”. Perhaps that was Mark’s intention, to leave the action and the consequences open-ended; after all, this is a commonplace way of inviting the reader to become involved in the story for herself.

Other manuscripts, however, must have seen this rather abrupt fade-out and concluded that Mark couldn’t possibly have meant that to be his last word.

Among these copyists some decided to cobble together a “respectable” ending from stories borrowed from other sources (verses 9-20). Others were less ambitious, preferring simply to add a very brief “bookend” to stop the gospel falling over on the shelf; this can be found as a footnote in the NRSV, but not in the NIV Church Bibles.

Even the “long ending” (vv 9-20) ends with the disciples engaged in mission, empowered by God’s presence. So, whatever we make of the apparent muddle, whatever Mark might have had in mind, he has certainly left us in no doubt as to the importance of what has happened; nor are we in any doubt that this describes a “work in progress” and his followers (then and now) bear responsibility for how the story continues.

Note one or two particular details. The women were clearly not expecting the resurrection when they went to the tomb. You can only anoint a dead body if it stays put! Didn’t they think ahead about how they might move the stone sealing the entrance to the tomb?

The message of the “young man” is clear. This is no time to be lingering here, as if this place is a sort of shrine to Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus himself has “gone ahead” into Galilee, a province held by many to be tainted with Gentile influences and so a bit “iffy” to the most orthodox Jews. Jesus has marched into one danger-zone – Jerusalem – and met with the fate he expected. Now it is for his followers to march into their own danger-zone, and begin the mission to the whole world.