

Homily for the Feast of St Mark the Evangelist

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Pusey House, Oxford, at the Sung Mass on 25 April 2023 (The Feast of St Mark the Evangelist), by Mr Jack Chisnall, Sacristan of Pusey House

And then.

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

I LOVE St Mark. My grandmother's church is a St Mark's - where I was baptised. Back in the day, Christian populations were getting bigger in little towns where coal mining and industry meant bigger populations. St James', the parish church of Haydock, was no longer big enough, so the Bishop encouraged the building of a new church. A church for the coal miners and their families. And I wonder how many of you are thinking: coal miners? Who better a namesake than St Mark? That "brutish genius" as one Biblical critic calls him - that homespun, earthy, straight-talking bit-of-rough St Mark. How often is it said that St Mark has a 'simple' style characterized by that breathless KAI EUTHUS (and then) - ironically, I hear that remark regurgitated as generically and monotonously as St Mark's usage is accused of being, but -

If I want to do anything tonight, it's to begin a fightback against people saying that about St Mark - that he's a kind of rustic simpleton who we have to cringingly accept got to write a gospel - who gets breathlessly, childishly caught up with what he is describing, unable as he is to order it into nicer, compound-complex sentences with nice subordinate clauses. Perhaps you all detect a bit of a chip on my shoulder here as I think about my Grandma's church - but tonight I want to suggest that, just because people talk like coal miners, it doesn't mean they aren't capable of getting at profound truth.

Fair's fair - perhaps there is a kind of charming simplicity about St Mark. I was grateful to be reminded today by a visitor here at the House that, whereas St Matthew and St Luke will try something rather poetic or grand when describing the Transfiguration (St Matthew says Our Lord's garments came 'as white as light' - St Luke will borrow a Homeric poetic word to say he 'flashed' or 'dazzled'), St Mark, in a beautifully grounded way, I think, says that Jesus' robes are whiter than any *gnapheus* on earth could make them - essentially, they were whiter than you'll get from any laundrette. Isn't that marvellous? It's nothing HIGH FALUTIN', it's just "better than you'll get from Fairy non-bio". Let's put it that way.

But what, I think, too many mistake for St Mark's coarseness is merely his fidelity to the story that he has to tell. The reason I am sure that St Mark's is the first gospel is because

St Matthew and St Luke seem terribly keen to correct him - to add explanation for him. To improve him. Consider, for example, when Jesus' disciples ask Our Lord about a prophecy that Elijah should come before the Messiah arrives - Mark simply records that Jesus hints "Elijah has come. They did whatever they pleased with him - and the Son of Man will suffer in the same way". But no more. St Mark expects his reader to have carefully read - the Baptist's similarity in garments, and the resonances of Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel with the Baptist, Herod, and Herodias. St Matthew - in an adorably anxious way, fearing that this is too subtle for readers - plonks onto the end "they saw he was speaking about John the Baptist".

It's a harmless enough instinct to fear that their more uncouth fellow evangelist isn't getting his point across (don't forget that St Luke's gospel begins with a very teacher's pet declaration that while others have had a go at writing the story of the church, he will do one accurately and in the right order). But here's the thing - they sometimes miss a level of depth that St Mark achieves, precisely because he is being more straightforward and reserved.

Mark 14:65 describing the trial of Jesus at the Sanhedrin: "And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to buffet him, and to say unto him, Prophecy: and the servants did strike him with the palms of their hands". Just that word "prophecy!". St Matthew and St Luke, again: 'oh no, Mark is being too subtle, doesn't he know how to communicate better! This needs spelling out' - so, in St Matthew 26:67-8: "Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands, Saying, Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?" - Clearer, right? No - because this actually misunderstands what has happened - this turns it into a plainer instance of testing Jesus' clairvoyance. As in 'if you're so prophetic, why didn't you see this coming? BOP!' But St Mark recognises that what happened here is an amazing providential irony - they shout 'prophecy!' at Jesus, not realising that He has prophesied this moment! In Mark 10:34, Jesus predicts "And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again". If those striking Jesus thought they were doing some zinger over Him, they unwittingly fall into the divine narrative that Jesus has written them into by virtue of what they are doing! St Matthew and St Luke, in trying to be overexplainers, don't let this very amazing irony breathe.

Staying simpler is not necessarily staying less right. Sometimes, particularly at Pusey House - we can confuse development in content-knowledge - of becoming an encyclopaedia of liturgy and history - with development in the spiritual life. I know I certainly can - I'm an overexplainer, neurotically keen to make sure I am understood. But the Church's mode of being - at its best - will always resist a kind of hierarchy of the intellectually enlightened at the top, the feeble understanders at the bottom. We're not Gnostics. Rather, I think what

St Mark embodies so well in his narrative is that a fidelity to who Jesus was and is and will always be means admitting that our human concerns about understanding will, at a certain level, only get in the way. We must not make Christ an answer to a question that we have asked and define the terms of. As Jesus does so often in St Mark's gospel, He bids us to tell no one - He bids us to just shut up and let him show us what kind of Messiah he is going to be - to show us what imagery, what language, what communal activities and what Scriptural allusions are the ones we should use to get what He's all about. Our Ephesians passage explains this process of learning who Jesus is as our faith's goal: "till we all come unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ". And whether you are an emeritus professor of theology, or you are someone who cannot read or write - we are all bid to encounter the same Lord Jesus Christ.

If I asked everyone in this room to learn the most accurate value they could for π (the mathematical value), x here might quote it to 10 places - or 100 places. But the person who simply knows it as *pi* in a sense knows it more accurately than any of them. Terribly un-Calvin of me. But understanding of a human kind isn't the goal of our faith. It's trust. Trust in the Messiah, Jesus. And all this - these rites, these cultic movements, these things - they're scaffolding - they're plaster casts that train us, grow us in the right way of trust. That doesn't mean they're not real, for the record - mere role play. Like the letter π , it's a real thing we can cling to, when to dig behind it would mean more thinking and writing than could be achieved in every human lifetime added together. Not that St Mark is anti-intellectual. Our Collect asks God that we would not end up being like children, believing any old nonsense. He is the patron saint of lawyers. I hope we will see in him NOT an eager but unlearned bumpkin, but a humble soul who felt that Jesus Christ can speak for Himself - and the best way to do that is to present him, as faithfully as possible, with his exact words - to abide in Him, the true vine, and He in us.