

Ember Days – Dealing With Endings

1. Introduction – Ember Days:

'Ember Days' seems a good description of this time of year, when all is dying back in nature, the days are shortening and we are bracing ourselves for winter. But Ember Days were also a religious institution (perhaps a Christianisation of ancient Latin rites at the turning-points of the season, in prayer for successful harvests), a time of abstinence (from which we, as pilgrims, can be exempt!). And they resonate with the sense of the seasons of our life – making today a time to take stock, as well as a time to take space and to curl up in front of a fire. I suggest today also invites us to reflect on endings and beginnings, just days before the Feast of Christ the King. As we're about to enter the Year of Mark (Year B in our Sunday lectionary), I suggest we read through the 13th chapter of Mark's Gospel, the so-called 'Marcan Apocalypse', together this morning, before taking a look at what Christmas would look like and how we might live the forthcoming season of Advent if we only had Mark's Gospel (and not Mt and Lk) as our guide.

2. Marcan Endings, Marcan Crises:

Mark, the earliest of the Gospels ends in such a surprising way that at least two separate attempts were made to complete it. But it seems that originally it ended with the little knot of women, running away in terror from the empty tomb, after listening to the words of the Angel of the Resurrection. Its closing words are "... *and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*" (Mk 16.8) Assuming this is deliberate, the point being made is presumably that the Gospel could simply end there. If the women had let their fear master them and never told the disciples that the Risen Christ was going before them into Galilee, then both "*the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" (Mk 1.1) and the Church itself would simply have petered out. It was up to the women then, forty years before the evangelist wrote; it's up to Mark's fellow Christians now.

Mark's community is facing a crisis on two fronts. Firstly, the second generation of believers is aging and beginning to die off. No longer will there be a direct line to the apostles who founded their local Church as a way of checking their interpretation of Christian faith and as a way of deriving more information and insight into the figure of Jesus that they had set themselves to follow. That seems to have led 'Mark', whoever he was (his name isn't in the text, and was probably added later as a title for the work), to write down a Gospel, gathering not just the story of Jesus' Passion and Death (probably already in a fairly well-established form) but also sayings of and stories about Jesus, forming them into a coherent written whole for the first time.

But alongside this demographic issue there was a far more dramatic crisis facing Mark's Church, one of persecution and physical threat. Tradition has it that John Mark was St. Peter's secretary and wrote his Gospel in Rome, which might have taken him to the imperial capital at the time of Nero's persecution, when Peter was crucified on the Vatican Hill in AD64 (cf. 1 Pet 5.13). But a bigger issue may have been the gathering storm around Jerusalem (cf. Mk 13.14-18). We can't unravel the different elements making up this passage, but feeling besieged (both physically and metaphorically) is the context for Mk 13 with its air of crisis and threat – a context which might

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seem to have a fresh relevance to us in these days of systemic crisis in banking, trade, international organizations and ecology: how to live with uncertainty?

3. The End Of All Things – Living With Uncertainty:

Mk 13 begins with a shocking prophecy of the destruction of the Temple : “*Not a single stone will be left on another; everything will be pulled down,*” (Mk 13.1-2) negating a building programme which lasted 20BC - 64AD and the national/religious pride it betokened (cf. Jn 3.20). The challenge to us is this: Could we imagine such a thing? It’s not just the question only of the religious structures we’re family with (from the Vatican to our parish church) but of how to live with change and uncertainty. Things were not ever thus. Times change, and, with them, the understanding of Christ and of the Kingdom of God. If everything were taken from me would I still be me? What are the things, people and situations which tell me ‘who I am’ and validate my being? What are the things which are distractions which one day will be lost to me – and probably need to be let go of? Was the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (dreadful though it was, with so much human suffering attached to it) in the end loss or gain, an imprisonment or a liberation, in the story of God’s People? How do we hear Christ’s own death (cf. Jn 2.20; 12.24) – as destruction and diminishment or as gateway to glory? And what of our own losses and our own ‘letting-goes’ – disaster, shipwreck, or an entry into a new stage and a new life?

Jesus’ reply to his disciples’ fears (“*When ..., and what sign will there be ...?*” Mk 13.4) is a decidedly disconcerting ‘reassurance’ that forthcoming disasters are just “*the beginning of the birth-pangs*” (Mk 13.7-8), followed by warnings against false Messiahs, about coming persecution, and against social division within the community. How to live in a world where the guarantors of order and stability (banks, foreign exchange, markets, governments) cease to provide either? It is tempting simply to withdraw (insofar as we can) into a place of stillness and beauty (cf. Mt 6.25-34). But Mk 13 bids us learn how to live with uncertainty and to build our lives (however unreasonable it may seem or feel at times), on this promise: “*anyone who stands firm to the end will be saved.*” (Mk 13.13) Endurance of a rather bloody-minded variety might well be a quality worth rediscovering – and proposing once again to our contemporaries. Having it all is no longer an option. Planning our career-path from cradle to a very long and leisurely retirement is no longer so clearly an option. But for the believer, Mark teaches, there is a knowledge that our own sufferings are a sharing in the Lord’s own Passion. The *question* asked of the disciple is: “*Can you drink the cup that I shall drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I must be baptized?*” (Mk 10.38) The *invitation* is: renounce yourself and take up your cross and follow me (Mk 10.34). The *promise* is: “*there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel who will not receive a hundred times as much, house, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land – and persecutions too – now in the present time and, in the world to come eternal life.*” (Mk 10.29-30) That’s the Gospel, says Mark to those under pressure. Does it sound like Good News to us?

4. Facing Idolatry:

There is one last theme in Mk 13 I wish to explore, namely that of idolatry and its ending. His first readers would have recognized reference to the setting up of “*the appalling abomination*” (Mk

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13.13) as an allusion to the Book of Daniel and to the searing memory of the events of 167-164 BC when the Greek king, Antiochus Epiphanes, decided to impose pagan cults and ban the practice of Judaism. The Jerusalem Temple was turned into a shrine to Zeus with the sacrifice of pigs on an altar at the centre of the Jewish world. Nothing more horrific or blasphemous was imaginable to the Jewish people. Similar irreligious horror was, it seems, prophesied by Jesus. This came to pass with the burning of the Temple during the siege of Jerusalem in AD70. Christian reflection, of course, says that the real desecration and the destruction of the true temple not made with human hands had already happened some forty years earlier, on Golgotha (cf. Mk 13.30) The message of the Book of Daniel was that the idolaters would themselves in the end be consumed by the refining fire of the final cataclysm, at the very moment when the saints, the faithful members of God's people, were vindicated. What looked like disaster would turn out to be the means by which all would be gathered into the Kingdom and the temptation to idolatry would finally be overcome. Jesus also promised an in-gathering, but not by violence. Rather, it consisted of the rounding up of the lost and the stray – the sinner, the tax-collector, the prostitute, the blind, the lame, the disfigured, the leprous, a festival of brokenness, drawing all into the presence of the Father.

It's easy to read our own culture's air of social and economic anxiety out of Mark: "... *the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will come falling out of the sky and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send the angels to gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the world to the ends of the sky.*" (13.24-27) After all, how many leaders have fallen either from grace or from power? How many institutions have seemed impotent in the face of events bigger than they are? Yet in the end Mark's message is one of permanence and durability: "*Sky and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son; no one but the Father.*" (Mk 13.32)

So Mark's final word of assurance to his beleaguered fellow-believers might be summarized in this way: that the uncertainty is shared by the Son and that this uncertainty can lead us away from distractions and idolatry, from the impermanent and the worthless, to what is essential and lasting and life-giving. ***The Son doesn't know either*** – which is theologically a very daring thing for Mark to pass on, given that he announced in the first line of his book that this was "*The Beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" (Mk 1.1) What he does know is that he can depend utterly on his Heavenly Father and so can his disciples, called away from the worship of false gods and false priorities to take up their cross and follow. Let's take that challenge and wrestle with it in our '*Ember Day*' together.

Reading Right On To The End (*On 1 Cor 12.31-13.13*)

When we read St. Paul we stop too soon
in his great hymn to love.

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We register the triple warning about
a lovelessness that would leave us
empty, booming and all-knowing,
people who had not got the point at all.

We hear the paean to love's durability,
constancy and comprehension.
Then we applaud: we know its truth
and our desire for such true love.
So at our weddings that is where
we're wont to stop.

What we do not want is what comes next,
the promise that all prowess, power
and our very faculties themselves will fail,
all stripped away till I,
made once again a new-born babe,
am ready fully to be known,
more so than I have ever known myself.

When all is gone, is lost,
then love alone remains
in all its elemental strength,
with its companions, faith and hope,
the lion and unicorn that support
its battle-worn escutcheon.

The cracked mirror shattered at the last into a thousand shards
on which the dazzling daylight from beyond plays endlessly,
only now we see the cost and the eternal worth
of what we can no longer speak, impose, explain.
Yes, then the only knowing left
is knowledge that there is no higher way than this.

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