

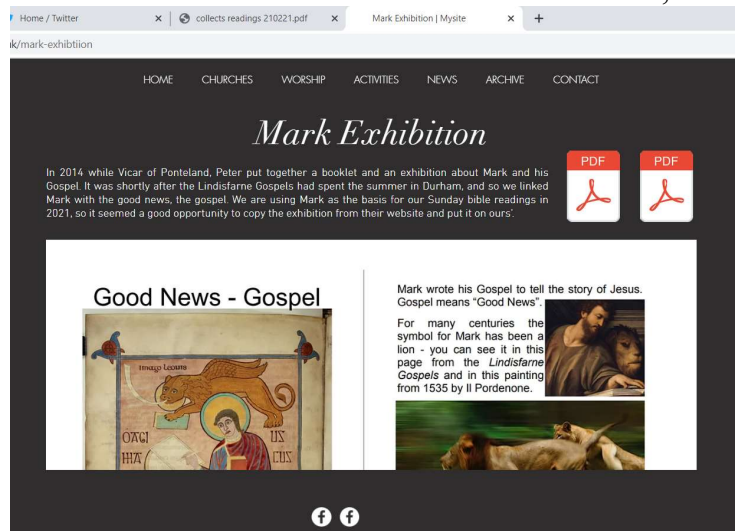
## SERMON, 21 FEBRUARY 2021, 1<sup>ST</sup> OF LENT – GEN 9, MK 1.9-15



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mark's gospel is speedy. We're 9 verses in, and Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as he was coming out of the water, the heavens were torn apart. God says all that needs to be said in 12 words – ““You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days – and we're told all about it in one sentence. Then John is arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God – it's almost as if one ministry finishes, and the other has to start. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Wow. Can I go and lie down in a darkened room? The most exciting thing I've done so far this weekend is make some scones, I'm too tired for all this action.

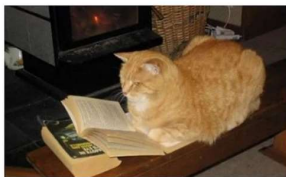


We use Mark's gospel as our main Sunday gospel every three years, and six years ago – when I was still in Ponteland – I produced a booklet and exhibition about it. I spent an evening last week copying it from the website of St Mary's Ponteland and putting it onto our website – it's under the Worship tab at the top of the home page.



For many years the symbol of Mark's gospel has been a lion – you can see it in this illustration from the Lindisfarne Gospels. It feels like a bounding lion. The phrase “and immediately”, *kai euthus* in Greek, is used eleven times in chapter 1. There is speed, there is urgency, this is Good News.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”



Now, I may be growing a beautiful shaggy mane, but I'm not sure how lion-like I feel. I can't say I'm enjoying lockdown whatever-number-it-is, I may have a house full of books and DVDs, I may have a lovely garden, but I'm bored! But I'm not leaping forward ready to pounce and get back in the fight. We had the phone call from the doctors last week telling us we get the jab this coming Friday. Even though Julie is under 60 for a few more months, she gets pushed up the list, and I – young though I am – am classed as her carer!

Although I am pleased to have a date, and I do encourage everyone to be baptised, I must be honest – part of my immediate reaction was rather, if you'll excuse my language, “will it make any bloody difference?” I'm still need to be careful, I still won't be able to go and see the kids, chasing trains is still a long time off, etc. etc.

And even in church life, I don't like Zoom – but this way I haven't got to worry about where we'll sit, and whether we social distance. We haven't got to cope with rotas and buildings, I haven't got to worry about who'll step forward to be churchwardens in May, or how parish share gets paid. When we zoom you are

lovely, you send nice emails, and I can turn you off when I want to go and hide!



I feel a bit like Parsley:

I'm a very friendly lion called Parsley,  
I am always very glad to see you wave.  
But please don't shout or speak to me too harshly,  
because I'm not particularly brave.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWJcT7Uipo>



"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The first thing I must hold on to, we must hold on to, is that the Kingdom of God is here. Christ has come, Christ has lived among us, Christ has died, Christ has come back to life. Christ is here among us. Yes the Kingdom is still to be fulfilled, yes the Kingdom has to be worked for, but we are already Kingdom people. We know that God is with us, that we walk with Christ. We walked with him before the day of our birth, we have walked with him through our lives, we have come to recognise and understand that we walk with him. We have walked with him in the last year, in church, out of church, in health, in sickness, when surrounded by fear, when tired, when bored, when frightened.



Thinking of our Genesis reading, we have seen a lot of rainbows over the last year. There have been times when it's felt a bit like "look at the rainbow children" and we've looked up, only to be swamped by the flood waters cascading down the valley. But those rainbows have shone incredibly brightly – in our community, in our churches, in our own lives. If someone had told us a year ago that we would find the Kingdom of God on Zoom – whatever Zoom was – we would have laughed. But we have, and we do, and we are.

I've only got this rainbow picture of St Matthew's – if anyone has a rainbow picture of St Edmund's, I'd love to have it please.

How do we continue the rainbows we've seen as the weather changes. One very basic thing, friendships and worship across two churches, together – how do we take a new sense of togetherness forward?

We actually do this, by doing what we do, what we do well, and do it confidently. We know the Kingdom of God in our churches and our worship and our lives. The foundations of faith go deep.



I am not going to say "we've been here a thousand years, we'll be here another thousand years", or "two hundred years" or whatever it is. I follow too many heritage organisations and historic places on twitter to know that having been here a long time is no guarantee of certainty that we will be here in the future. The National Trust, that great heritage organisation, made 514 compulsory

redundancies and 782 voluntary redundancies last year after an income shortfall of £200 million (source NT Magazine Sprint 2021). Personally, as someone with an MA in Public History and Heritage, I think it is pitiful that all some people in government seem to be concerned about is how dare the National Trust and others ask difficult questions about our country's history, but don't get me started. Just because church buildings been part of our communities for years, doesn't mean that church buildings will always be part of our communities.

But if Christian communities love and care for their buildings, and make sure that they are as open as possible, and people feel as welcome as possible – then we are proclaiming the Kingdom of God, living the Kingdom of God, and people will respond.



*Midnight Mass 2020*

As soon as we can, we will need to open, to be open, to put the kettle on, to spend time sitting and talking and listening and praying – and all the other things that we are good at.

We will need to proclaim the Kingdom with the baptisms and the weddings and the funerals and all the things that we are good at doing – and you can't leave all that welcome to me and a handful of wardens, ex-wardens, or people who have always done these things. Because some of the people who have always done these things are not coming back. And others must step up – and you will.



And we will have to be better at saying to people “faith matters”. That here is a doctrine, a way of living, a Saviour, who makes sense. In the here and now, I



can put on as many Zooms as you like, but unless you respond, unless you encourage other people to respond and get involved, then I'm wasting my time.

And as we get back to normality, we will need to build the Kingdom together. We will need to encourage people to come back, we will need to encourage people to find faith afresh. If you haven't found any point in God and faith in the darkness of a pandemic, you're probably going to take some convincing that God and faith matters when the world is normal again.

Are we (I include myself) bold enough to tell our kids, our grandkids, our work colleagues, our friends and our neighbours, how faith has got us through, is getting through, this year? Are we bold enough to continue with that faith as normality returns and there are so many other things we want to get back to? Are we bold enough to fight for justice, to fight for the poorest and the marginalised – the people who have been hardest hit by this pandemic? People will be suffering the effects of Covid for many years to come – our country is not good at standing with those who are struggling, those who are hurting, those who have been hit the hardest.

Will the church, nationally and locally, work with others for a fair, just Society, a better Society than we had before, working for the wholeness of God's creation. The Kingdom of God takes repentance, it takes belief, it takes effort, it takes the cross.



Believe the Good News – this is Good News, but it is the Good News of the Cross. Lent is a journey to the cross, and we can't pretend otherwise. The anthem we will shortly listen to is Orlando Gibbons, "Drop, drop, slow tears" – ours is a faith that knows the depths of suffering. And because we know the depths of suffering, the depths of evil, the price of salvation, we are there, and we offer the Kingdom in the midst of it all. Good News, love, friendship, faith, Jesus - someone who cries with us, who wipes the tears, who journeys with us as we share Good News to this world.

Peter Barham, 19 February 2021